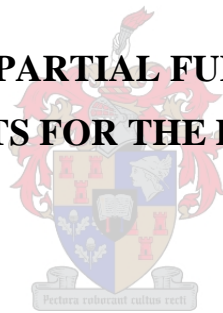


**THE MAINTENANCE OF LAND AS THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL  
IMPLICATION OF THE SABBATH YEAR IN LEVITICUS 25:1-7**

**BY**

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**DECEMBER 2007**

# DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any University for a degree.

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# ABSTRACT

## **THE MAINTENANCE OF LAND AS THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL IMPLICATION OF THE SABBATH YEAR IN LEVITICUS 25: 1-7**

Chapter one of this thesis discusses the justification of the investigation of the Sabbath year institution along practical, theological, economic and ethical grounds. The hypothesis statement is that the most important theological effects of the Sabbath year, according to the Pentateuchal books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy can be traced back to the maintenance of land within the family. The selected methodology for this thesis entails a literature study of existing research (Chapters one to four) and a ‘close reading’ approach in order to examine the central text in this thesis (Lev 25: 1-7) (Chapter 5). The key terms defined in Chapter five are ‘land’, ‘maintenance of land’ and ‘Sabbath year’.

Chapter two provides a theological background of the Sabbath year in the Pentateuch. Three agricultural annual festivals are discussed, namely the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest and the Feast of Tabernacles which form the theological context of Exodus 23:14-17 and Deuteronomy 15: 1-18.

Chapter three identifies the motivations of the Sabbath year in the Covenant and Deuteronomic Codes and investigates the theological trends in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Chapter four is firstly an investigation of the theological trends in the Book of Leviticus and secondly of the theological trends in the Holiness Code. This chapter also covers the contents of the important institution to do with family land and other humanitarian matters, the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25: 8-54).

Chapter five discusses the theological implications of the Sabbath year in Lev 25: 1-7.

Chapter six is the concluding chapter which seeks to verify whether the hypothesis has been proven or not.

The results of the research on the theological ethical implications of the Sabbath year for the retention of land within the family were conditionally positive. It was found that the Sabbath year helped land to remain within the family because of the following reasons: 1. the Sabbath year reminded humans to act as good stewards of God's land; 2. the Sabbath year ensured food supplies for all the people because of God's blessing on the spontaneous produce of the land in this special year; 3. the Sabbath year allowed the land to lie fallow a whole year thus allowing the land to be more productive in the following season thus helping poorer families to have a new beginning on the road to better life in the land; 4. As a year in which the burden of debt was removed from debtors this year helped poor landowners to recover economically and the cancellation of debts actually helped poor people not to sink deeper and deeper into debt which might end up leading to loss of land and other property. The Sabbath year theological and ethical stipulations were meant to create an environment where land was supposed to remain within families that inherited it from the LORD at the beginning, had Israel been obedient to God.

# OPSOMMING

## **DIE BEHOUD VAN GROND AS TEOLOGIES-ETIESE IMPLIKASIE VAN DIE SABBATJAAR IN LEVITIKUS 25: 1-7**

Hoofstuk een van hierdie tesis bespreek die motivering vir die ondersoek van die Sabbatjaar as instelling op grond van praktiese, teologiese, ekonomiese en etiese gronde. Die hipotese is dat die mees belangrike teologiese implikasies van die Sabbatjaar, volgens die Pentateugboeke Eksodus, Levitikus en Deuteronomium teruggevoer kan word na die behoud van grond binne die familie. Die gekose metodologie vir hierdie tesis behels 'n literatuurstudie van bestaande navorsing (Hoofstukke een tot vier) en 'n 'naby-lees' benadering in Hoofstuk 5, wat die sentrale teks van hierdie tesis behandel, naamlik Levitikus 25: 1-7. Die belangrikste begrippe wat in hierdie hoofstuk beskryf word, is 'grond', 'Sabbatjaar' en 'familie'.

Hoofstuk twee bied 'n teologiese agtergrond tot die Sabbatjaar in die Pentateug. Drie jaarlikse landboukundige feeste word bespreek, naamlik die Fees van die Ongesuurde Brode, die Oesfees en die Loofhuttefees, wat die teologiese konteks van Eksodus 23: 14-7 en Deuteronomium 15: 1-18 vorm.

Hoofstuk drie identifiseer die motiverings vir die Sabbatjaar in die Verbondsboek en die Deuteronomiumkodeks, asook die teologiese tendense in die boeke Eksodus en Deuteronomium.

Hoofstuk vier behels 'n ondersoek na die teologiese tendense in die boek van Levitikus, asook in die Heiligheidskodeks. Hierdie hoofstuk behandel ook die inhoud van die belangrike instelling van familiegrond en ander humanitêre aangeleenthede in die Jubeljaar (Lev 25: 8-25).

Hoofstuk vyf bespreek die teologiese implikasies van die Sabbatjaar in Levitikus 25: 1-7.

Hoofstuk ses is die finale hoofstuk en poog om te verifieer of die hipotese van die tesis bewys kan word of nie.

Die uitkoms van die navorsing oor die teologiese-etiese implikasies van die Sabbatjaar vir die behoud van grond binne die familie was positief, maar voorwaardelik. Daar is bevind dat die Sabbatjaar gehelp het om grond binne die familie te behou oor die volgende redes: 1. Die Sabbatjaar het mense herinner om as goed na God se grond te kyk; 2. Die Sabbatjaar het verseker dat daar genoeg kos is vir al die mense, juis as gevolg van God se seën op die spontane lewering van produkte deur middel van die grond in hierdie spesiale jaar; 3. Die Sabbatjaar het bepaal dat die grond vir `n jaar braak lê en dit het beteken dat die grond in die volgende seisoen meer produktief sou wees. Dit sou met ander woorde armer families help om `n nuwe begin te maak tot `n beter lewe in die land; 4. As `n jaar waarin die belemmering van skuld afgeskryf is, het hierdie jaar arm grondeienaars gehelp om ekonomies weer op die been te kom. Die kwytskelding het arm mense gehelp om nie verder skuld aan te gaan wat op die ou einde die verlies aan grond en ander eiendom sou beteken nie. Die Sabbatjaar se teologiese en etiese stipulasies was bedoel om `n situasie te skep waar grond binne die families wat dit aanvanblik van God ge-erf het, sou bly as hulle gehoorsaam aan God was.

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Dedicated to my beloved Mother, Lydia Mhlanga (nee Mapaike).

A demanding task such as the writing of this thesis to its completion would not have been possible without the academic, financial and spiritual support of other people. That is why I would like to make my heartfelt acknowledgements to those people who contributed immensely to the development and completion of this thesis.

First and foremost I would like to thank Professor Hendrik Bosman, who as my study leader suggested that I needed to work on a topic that would be of great theological benefit to my tradition as a Seventh-day Adventist. Hence the choice I made of studying the Sabbath year legislation and its theological implication for land within the family. The Sabbath year law has many theological and ethical links with the seventh day Sabbath, a day which is of great significance to Seventh-day Adventists.

I compare the writing of a thesis like this to the experience of walking through a thicket where one needs the assistance of one who has passed this way before. For me the academic pilgrimage under the guidance of Professor Bosman has been an academically enriching experience. Professor Bosman's methodological expertise and choice words of encouragement helped to make this thesis possible.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
OPSOMMING	v
DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1 INTRODUCTION	2
1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT	2
1.2.1 Practical grounds	2
1.2.2 Theological grounds	3
1.2.3 Economic grounds	4
1.2.4 Ethical grounds	4
1.3 HYPOTHESIS	4
1.4 METHODOLOGY	5
1.4.1 Literature study of existing research	5
1.4.2 Close reading	5
1.5 DEFINITION OF TERMS	5
1.5.1 Land in the Sabbath year law	6
1.5.2 Maintenance of land	7

1.5.3 The Sabbath year	8
1.6 CONCLUSION	10
<b>CHAPTER 2: THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND TO THE SABBATH YEAR IN THE PENTATEUCH</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION	12
2.2 ANNUAL FESTIVALS	12
2.2.1 Feast of the Unleavened Bread	13
2.2.2 Feast of the Harvest	15
2.2.3 Feast of the Booths (Tabernacles)	16
2.3 THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GOD EMANATING FROM THE ANNUAL FESTIVALS	18
2.3.1 God as Redeemer	18
2.3.2 God as Provider	18
2.3.3 God as Lawgiver	19
2.3.4 God as Divine Protector	20
2.3.5 God as Keeper of the Covenant	21
2.4 CONCLUSION	21
<b>CHAPTER 3: LEGAL MOTIVATIONS OF THE SABBATH YEAR AND THEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE COVENANT AND DEUTERONOMIC CODES</b>	<b>23</b>
3.1 INTRODUCTION	23
3.2 COVENANT CODE	23

3.2.1 Exodus 21:2-6	23
3.2.2 Exodus 23:10-11	27
3.2.3 Theological Trends in the Covenant Code	28
3.2.3.1 Instructions concerning the making of cultic objects	30
3.2.3.2 Regulatory principles ‘mishpatim’	32
3.2.3.3 Cultic and social stipulations	34
3.2.3.4 Instructions concerning the Sabbath and religious festivals	36
3.2.4 Theological Trends in the Book of Exodus	36
3.2.4.1 Israel in Egypt, its deliverance by God and its response	38
3.2.4.2 Israel in the wilderness and God’s providence	39
3.2.4.3 Israel at Sinai and the ratification of the covenant	40
3.2.4.4 Conclusion	42
3.3 DEUTERONOMIC CODE	43
3.3.1 Deuteronomy 15:1-11	43
3.3.2. Deuteronomy 15:12-18	49
3.3.3 Theological trends in the Deuteronomic Code and the Book of Deuteronomy	54
3.3.3.1 Commandments unity and purity of cult	55
3.3.3.2 Decrees about persons in office	59
3.3.3.3 Commands on various subjects	61
3.3.3.4 God as provider	62
3.3.4 Conclusion	64

3.3.5 Theological trends in the Book of Deuteronomy	65
3.3.5.1 Motivation speeches including some recollections of Israel	67
3.3.5.2 The Deuteronomic Code	70
3.3.5.3 Curses and Blessings	70
3.3.5.4 The reading of the law	70
3.4 CONCLUSION	73
 <b>CHAPTER 4: THEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS AND THE HOLINESS CODE</b>	
4.1 INTRODUCTION	76
4.2 THEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS (Lev 1-16, 27)	76
4.2.1 Regulations for sacrifices (Lev 1-7)	79
4.2.2 Ordination of priests and the first sacrifices at the Tent of Meeting (Lev 8:1-10:20)	80
4.2.3 Laws on Ritual purity (Lev 11-15)	83
4.2.4 Regulations for the Day of Atonement (Lev 16; 23:26-32)	85
4.2.5. Redemption of land dedicated to God (Lev 27:16-25, 28)	89
4.2.6 Tithing Law (Lev 27:30-33)	94
4.3 THEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE HOLINESS CODE (Lev 17-26)	97
4.3.1 Introductory formula (Lev 17:1)	97
4.3.2 Call of Israel to obey Divine decrees (Lev 18:4)	98
4.3.3 Divine punishments for sexual perversions (Lev 18:24-29)	99
4.3.4 Call of Israel to a life of holiness (Lev 19:1-3)	100
4.3.5 Sabbath Law (Lev 23:3)	102

4.3.6 Day of the First Fruits (Lev 23:9-11)	104
4.3.7 Feast of the Trumpets (Lev 23:23-25)	104
4.3.8 Jubilee Law (Lev 25:8-55)	106
4.3.8.1 Timing and general provisions (Lev 25:8-13)	107
4.3.8.2 Buying and selling of land (Lev 25 14-17)	110
4.3.8.3 Blessings due to the observance of the Jubilee (Lev 25:18-22)	111
4.3.8.4 Redemption of property and the Jubilee (Lev 25:23-28)	113
4.3.8.5 Redemption of houses in walled cities and the Jubilee (Lev 25:29-31)	116
4.3.8.6 Land belonging to the Levites and the Jubilee (Lev 25:32-34)	117
4.3.8.7 Helping the Poor (Lev 25:35-38)	118
4.3.8.8 Israelite servants and the Jubilee (Lev 25:39-43)	121
4.3.8.9 Laws concerning the holding of slaves (Lev 25:44-46)	123
4.3.8.10 Redemption of Israelite slaves (Lev 25:47-55)	123
4.3.8.11 Retention of land by Israel as a nation (Lev 26:1-5)	128
4.4 CONCLUSION	131

## **CHAPTER 5: MAINTENANCE OF LAND ACCORDING TO A CLOSE**

<b>READING OF THE SABBATH LAW IN LEVITICUS 25: 1-7</b>	<b>138</b>
5.1 INTRODUCTION	138
5.2 LEVITICUS 25:1	139
5.3 LEVITICUS 25:2	144
5.4 LEVITICUS 25:3	146

5.5 LEVITICUS 25:4	147
5.6 LEVITICUS 25:5	148
5.7 LEVITICUS 25:6	149
5.8 LEVITICUS 25:7	152
5.9 CONCLUSION	152
<b>CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION</b>	154
<b>Bibliography</b>	173

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the problem statement of this thesis and the justification for the investigation of the Sabbath year institution.

### 1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Sabbath year institution is enshrined in four of the Pentateuchal books: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The aim of the thesis is to explore the theological-ethical value of this Old Testament institution as reflected in three legal codes, namely the Covenant Code, the Holiness Code and the Deuteronomic Code. Special emphasis will be placed on the most elaborate discussion of the Sabbath year in Leviticus 25:1-7.

Investigation of the Sabbatical year institution can be justified on practical, theological, economic and ethical grounds and these areas constitute four focal matters for discussion:

#### 1.2.1 Practical grounds

*Knauth* (2000) stated that what the Sabbath year, as prescribed in the Holiness Code, means and how to apply it, can be debated. He further noted that “a universally observed fallow year threatens severe hardship to a subsistence-level, agriculturally-based economy. Such hardship would be inconsistent with the stated purpose of this legislation of providing food and relief for the poor” (2000: 1147).

*Knauth* (2000) further presented what seemed to him to be the most reasonable and practical way in which the Sabbath year was observed. He suggested that “another possibility, given that the Jewish calendar year begins with harvest and ends with planting, is that the law envisions a full crop planted in the sixth year which is then exempt from harvest in the seventh, but is left for the poor and animals as food, some of which will naturally reseed itself when sowing is prohibited later that year. This would allow minimal hardship to the

community and maximum benefit to the poor, but little of the environmental benefit expected in our modern understanding of ‘fallow’” (2000: 1147).

Knauth’s (2000:1147) argument sounds convincing, but the problem is that not all scholars are in agreement that the way he proposed the Sabbath year was kept is actually the way it was observed in reality.

### **1.2.2 Theological grounds**

At a theological level there are scholars who claim that among the Israelites, the Sabbath year was part and parcel of practices borrowed from some ancient near eastern societies. *Morgenstern* (1962), concerning the origin of the Sabbath year, made the bold claim: “It had its origin in the so-called pentecontad calendar, the earliest calendar used among the ancient Semitic peoples, a calendar of strictly agricultural character, which, as a legal document of the then prevailing Canaanite agricultural civilization of Palestine, the invading nomadic or semi-nomadic Israelite clans and tribes adopted when they conquered and established permanent residence in the land” (1962: 142).

Morgenstern (1962) further stated: “Just as in this calendar seven days constituted a basic and convenient unit of time-reckoning, the Sabbath, observed as a taboo day, one upon which agricultural labour was rigorously prohibited, so, correspondingly, seven years constituted another larger unit of time reckoning with the seventh and final year therein observed as a taboo year, in which, for its entire duration all agricultural labour was dropped or interrupted” (1962: 142).

Concerning the religious motivation behind the Sabbath year, Morgenstern (1962) suggested: “Whether like the Sabbath day, this seventh year was originally regarded as being controlled by evil spirits, is uncertain, but this seems altogether probable” (1962: 142).

To summarize Morgenstern’s position on the origin and religious basis of the Sabbath year, one can only say that according to Morgenstern (1962), the Sabbath year had a Canaanite origin and in terms of control, was driven by evil spirits. The question to be asked is whether Morgenstern’s position on the theological motivation of the Sabbath year is a true reflection of the three legal codes of the Pentateuch on the same subject (1962: 142). The literature study and analysis of the Sabbath year will assist us to find the general trends concerning the theological motivation behind the Sabbath year and its ethical implications.



### **1.2.3 Economic grounds**

Other areas of contention hinge on the concept of debt release. Scholars like *von Rad* (1964: 106) are of the opinion that debt was wholly remitted in the Sabbath year, whilst others like *Wright* (1996: 188) and *Barker* (2003: 701) are of the opinion that debt was only suspended. These varied interpretations point clearly to the need for a re-look into the Sabbath year's theology and the need to come up with a position that reflects the true thrust of the biblical text.

Along sociological as well as economic lines, *Wenham* (1979) noted that "in biblical times a man who incurred a debt that he could not repay could be forced to sell off his land or even his personal freedom by becoming a slave" (1979: 30). *Wenham* (1979: 30) further noted that when left unchecked, this process led to great social divisions with a class of rich land owners exploiting a mass of landless peasants.

These are the kinds of issues that justify the investigation of the Sabbath year's theological-ethical impact on the theology of the Pentateuch and its implications for the retention of land in the family.

### **1.2.4 Ethical grounds**

Along purely ethical lines, the question may also be asked: Was the seventh year in Israel the only time she was supposed to extend her benevolence to the needy? What happened in the other six years with regards to the needy? If the Sabbath year encouraged people to extend benevolence in one out of six years, was it not therefore an institution which inculcated values of thriftiness more than it did to promote a spirit of generosity? If this is the case, would it be wrong to assume that the Sabbath year was void and empty in terms of ethical value?

These diverging grounds clearly point to the need to investigate the question: *what was the theological-ethical impact of the Sabbath year according to the Pentateuch as investigated in recent research?*

## **1.3 HYPOTHESIS**

In order to determine the theological-ethical impact of the Sabbath year institution on the message of the Pentateuch, I will work within a conceptual framework which assumes that

the most important theological-ethical effects of the Sabbath year, according to the Pentateuchal books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, can be traced back to the maintenance of land in the family.

## **1.4 METHODOLOGY**

In this section I will present the methods employed as I sought to achieve the goal of this thesis. What follows is a brief discussion of the methods used, namely ‘a literature study’, ‘close reading’ and the ‘definition of important terms.’

### **1.4.1 Literature study**

In order to discuss the theological-ethical impact of the Sabbath year according to the Pentateuch, I did a thorough literature study on work done by recent researchers. For the purpose of this thesis, “recent” refers to selected literature on the Sabbath year from 1950 to the present. The literature selection was guided by the following criteria: academic relevance and scholarly authority. In other words, the selected literature included only that which has academic relevance for Sabbath year issues. Such literature also had to be scholarly works and for that reason, I made use of works published in literary sources such as Bible Commentaries, Bible Dictionaries, and Bible Encyclopaedias and Theological journals. I also tapped in on sources from my own ecclesiastical and theological tradition, the Seventh-day Adventists.

### **1.4.2 Close reading**

The second method I employed in this study of the Sabbath year is ‘the close reading approach to the interpretation of texts.’ According to *Clines* (1983: 33), close reading involves a careful scrutiny of all aspects of a text’s language, style, metaphors, images and their relations to one another. Analysing a text closely helps to bring into sharp focus its details and how these details are related to one another. The whole process in the end helps to achieve some unity of conception of the whole text and to establish a mastery of key concepts of each passage. For the purposes of this thesis, close reading will entail a verse by verse investigation of the presentation of the Sabbath year in Leviticus 25:1-7.

## **1.5 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

Three major terms need to be defined, namely ‘*land*’, ‘*maintenance of land*’ and ‘*Sabbath*

year'. A comprehensive literature search was done in order to compile meaningful definitions of these terms. I was informed by the publications of other scholars as well as the information in the legal codes which provide the literary setting in which the Sabbath year is found.

### **1.5.1 Land in the Sabbath year law**

The first term is *land* in the context of the Sabbath year law. Although not specifically defined by scholars, one can still get a lead from them on what each one of them felt the term “land” means as referred to in the context of the Sabbatical year. I will mention here some influential scholars who referred to land and its associated functions, in order for me to compile a working definition of land.

*Noth* (1962: 184) in his discussion of land, made the following comment: Yahweh is the owner of the land and to demonstrate this fact, the land was to rest and remain undisturbed by the intervention of man to whom it had passed.

*Harrison* (1980: 224) says that the Sabbath year law was given at Sinai and it looked forward to a time when the Israelites would be in sedentary occupation in Palestine. The land at that time would lie fallow and orchards and vineyards would remain dormant during the Sabbath year and there would also be no systematic harvesting of crops or of fruits or of the vines.

*Maltsberger's* (1991: 1217) definition of the Sabbath year, though not quite comprehensive, does throw some light on what the term land meant in the Sabbath year context. He defined the Sabbath year as “every year when farmers rested their land from bearing crops to renew the land and people of Israel” (1991: 1217).

According to *Janzen* (1992: 144) there are three words in Hebrew for land, namely *sadeh*, *'eres* and *adama*. Janzen (1992: 144) pointed out that the term *sadeh*, translated as “field” is not commonly used. The second term *'eres* is translated as “earth”, “ground” or “country”. When the term *'eres* is translated as “earth”, it refers to the realm of human habitation. When it is translated as “land” it refers to a specific geographical region such as the Negev or Ararat. It is also used to refer to a territory of specific people (e.g. Kenites in Gen 15:19). The third term *adama* according to Janzen (1992: 144) is a non-political term referring to agricultural land that sustains a sedentary population in contrast to the wilderness. The *adama* is usually owned by a person such as a head of a household or a group of people.

With this relevant information concerning the meaning of land, it is possible to come up with elements that constituted land in the Sabbath year context:

- a. Human beings were supposed to work the land for crop production for six years.
- b. In the Sabbath year, humans were to desist from working that land.
- c. The land is also called agricultural land and includes fields for crops and orchards and vineyards.
- d. The people who worked on the land are called farmers by other scholars.
- e. The land belongs to humans who act as stewards to the ultimate owner of the land, God.
- f. In Hebrew and in the Sabbath year context, land corresponds more with the term *adama* when this word was used with connotations of land owned by a person or by a household (Jansen, 1992: 144).

With these insights in mind, the working definition of land for the purpose of this study can be stated as follows: Land in the Sabbatical year context referred to the piece of agricultural land, including orchards and vineyards which belonged to an individual or household, as God's stewards and which they farmed to get food for family sustenance. This definition will be followed up by a definition of '*maintenance of land*'.

### **1.5.2 Maintenance of land**

'*Maintenance of land*' is the next expression I would like to define since this thesis deals with the topic: 'the maintenance of land within the family.' '*Maintenance of land*' is an expression built around two major terms, namely '*maintenance*' and '*land*' which have been defined above. According to the Oxford School Dictionary (1976: 271) the word '*maintenance*' comes from the verb '*maintain*' which means "cause something to continue; keep in existence". From this understanding of the word '*maintain*', '*maintenance of land*' can be defined as the act of causing agricultural land, including orchards and vineyards which belonged to an individual or family, to continue (remain) in the hands and custody of that particular individual or family.

It is also important to note that as stewards of land, families entrusted with land were

supposed to maintain that land well. This aspect has been a subject of much discussion by ecology theologians. *Mckim* (1996: 80) stated that from a theological point of view, a concern for ecology is rooted in the recognition of God as Creator who calls humans to care for the earth and its resources in responsible and just ways. *Collins and Farrugia* (2000: 72) defined human ecology as the study of human beings in their interaction with their environment. They went further to point out that as God's representatives, men and women are supposed to be responsible stewards of creation (Gen 1:26-31).

The theological insights above point to the reality that God not only protected the land rights of the people whom He entrusted with land but that He also expected those people to act as responsible stewards of the land.

### **1.5.3 The Sabbath year**

The study leading to the definition of the Sabbath year is chronological in nature. It begins with works of scholars first published in the decade between the years 1950 and 1960 and ends with works of scholars published in the first decade of the twenty first century. I will attempt to cover at least one or more scholars for each decade.

One of the theologically rich works that was produced between 1950 and 1960 is the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary set. I will begin the literature study with this commentary, firstly because the commentary has relevance to the subject matter and secondly because the commentary's publication dates fall within the time frame of the literature study.

In the commentary referred to above, *Nichol and Cottrell* (1953: 626) gave a comparative approach in their introductory remarks to the Sabbath year in the Covenant Code. They wrote that "though other nations had their days of rest at regular or irregular intervals, entire years of rest were observed by the Israelites" (1953: 626). *Nichol and Cottrell's* remarks concerning the fallow year are positive (1953: 626). They argued that since agriculture was primitive, and crop rotation and artificial fertilizers were not used, it is possible that no financial loss resulted from the program.

The same authorities also discussed at length the devotional dimension of the Sabbath year, the reading of the Torah before the people. A major theological contribution by these authorities concerning the Sabbath year is their emphasis on the uniqueness of Israel's Sabbath year in comparison with the special days of surrounding cultures.

Noth (1962) highlights the parallels that exist between the Sabbath year and the Year of Jubilee: “The Sabbatical year and the year of jubilee have each in a special way the same theme, *the restitution in integrum* or restoration to the original state” (1962: 183). Noth (1962) also sees Exodus 23:10 as having requirements of the Sabbath year that are reflected in Leviticus 25. He describes as “striking the disproportion between the short section about the Sabbath year and the very extensive section about the jubilee year section” (1981: 184). Leviticus 25:1-7 has more detail than Exodus 23:10-12. Noth (1962) also furnishes the theological rationale for the Sabbath year in Leviticus 25. Yahweh is the owner of land and the directness of the relationship had to be restored every seventh year without the land having its rest disturbed by the intervention of man to whom it has passed. The Sabbath year was a full agricultural year, according to Noth (1962). The emphasis of the Sabbath year seemed, according to the Holiness Code, to be more concerned with reminding human beings that they were stewards of God’s property and God is the absolute Owner.

Harrison (1980), in his discussion of the Sabbath year in the Holiness Code, says: “the principle of Sabbath rest is now applied to a seven-year period in which the final year is to be observed as a Sabbath to the Lord” (1980: 224). Given at Mount Sinai, this institution looked forward to the time when the Israelites would be in sedentary occupation in Palestine. The land at that time would lie fallow, whilst the orchards and vineyards would remain untended. During the Sabbath year, there would be no systematic harvesting of crops. This provision would be of particular importance for the poor and those who did not own land (see also Exod 23:11).

*Schiffman* (1985) says that the Sabbath year was a “biblical prescription that every seventh year the land must lie uncultivated based on the assumption that the land does not actually belong to any one person to dispose of at will, but to God himself” (1985: 889). Schiffman (1985) further explains that that which grew on its own in the Sabbatical year, was to be left for the poor and wild animals (Exod 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-7). Creditors were supposed to release what they had lent to their neighbours (Deut 15:2). The whole exercise was supposed to correct social inequities.

*Hopkins* (1990) defined the Sabbath year as a “special year, recurring every seven years, associated in the legal literature with the release of slaves (Exod 21:2-6; Deut 15:12-18), the fallow of agricultural land (Exod 23:10-11; Lev 25:2-7), the remission of debt (Deut 31:10-13) and the recitation of the Torah (Deut 31:10-13)” (1990: 782). Hopkins (1990) states that

the “slave release and fallow-year laws of Exodus appear to lie at the base of the Sabbath year institution though neither is explicitly related to a fixed and regularly recurring cycle of years” (1990: 782). The instructions of the fallow-year in Hopkins’ view called for the abandoning of the practice of farming in the seventh year in order to provide food for the poor. The fallow-year system was a way designed to focus attention on the landless and poor in the wider community.

Knauth (2000) defined the Sabbath year as “the seventh year in a seven-year cycle designated as a year of resting and a year of release” (2000: 1147). In his opinion the Sabbath year is an extension of the Sabbath day law. Key features of this year included rest from labour, providing food for the poor, cancellation of debt and reading of the law. The fallow year’s spontaneous crop provided food for slaves, hired workers, aliens, livestock and wild animals. Generally, Knauth (2000) viewed the Sabbath year as focused on humanitarian concerns.

So far, in the literature just covered, certain general trends seem to surface. There seems to be a general agreement that the Sabbath year institution did indeed serve a humanitarian purpose. However, it appears that scholars are not all in agreement that the institution was universally kept in Israel. Issues that seem to be repeatedly discussed by scholars with regards to the Sabbath year include: land rest, the poor, slave release and debt release.

Based on the literature study, one can, with minor modifications, define the Sabbath year along Hopkins’ (1990: 782) view because he captured the various facets of the Sabbath year as it appears in various sections of the Pentateuch. The Sabbath year by definition was the final year in a cycle of seven years associated in the Pentateuch with the release of slaves, care for the poor, the fallow of agricultural land, the remission of debts and the recitation of the Torah.

## **1.6 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I managed to justify the investigation of the Sabbath year institution along practical, theological, economic and ethical grounds. The hypothesis statement of this study is that the most important effects of the Sabbath year according to the Pentateuchal books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy can be traced back to the maintenance of land in the family.

Key terms were defined because of their central place in this thesis, namely ‘*land*’,

*‘maintenance of land’ and ‘Sabbath year’.*

In view of the problem statement and formulation of the hypothesis, this thesis will be structured in the following way:

In Chapter 2, I will engage in a discussion of the theological background to the Sabbath year in the Covenant Code. The focus will be on the three agricultural annual festivals: the Feast of Unleavened Bread; the Feast of the Harvest and the Feast of Booths (Exod 23:14-17). These annual festivals being agricultural in nature, pointed to the importance of land as a precious gift which God used to supply for human needs. It was through land that God gave the people crops and sustained the lives of their herds and flocks. I will also investigate theological perspectives emanating from the annual festivals.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the legal motivations of the Sabbath year and theological trends in the Covenant and Deuteronomic Codes.

Chapter 4 will focus on theological trends in the Book of Leviticus and the Holiness Code.

Chapter 5 will focus on the maintenance of land according to the Sabbath law in Leviticus 25:1-7 by means of close reading of each verse.

In Chapter 6, I will make concluding remarks and provide recommendations for further study.



## CHAPTER 2

### THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND TO THE SABBATH YEAR IN THE PENTATEUCH

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the theological background to the Sabbath year and focuses on important annual Hebrew festivals which form the immediate literary context of the Sabbath year legislation in both the Covenant Code and the Deuteronomic Code.

#### 2.2 ANNUAL FESTIVALS

To capture the theological background of the Sabbath year in the Pentateuch, I will discuss the three agricultural annual festivals: 1) the Feast of Unleavened Bread, 2) the Feast of Harvest and 3) the Feast of Tabernacles (Exod 23:14-17). These laws comprise the section in Exodus immediately after the giving of the Sabbath year legislation in the Covenant Code (Exod 23:10-11) and after the discussion of the year of cancelling debts and the year of releasing slaves in the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 15). Harrison (1988: 786) stated that these festivals were important occasions for commemorating God's power and provision in life. They were designated by the term *hag*, denoting a festival usually observed by some sort of pilgrimage.

The noun *hag* is used sixty two times in the Old Testament and in its verbal form it occurs sixteen times; most frequently in parts where priestly influence can be traced (Exod 23; 34; Lev 23 Deut 16). It also carries the following meanings: procession, round dance, festival or feast (Bosman, 1997: 20).

The *hag* as a religious festival involves a number of theological aspects. During pilgrimage festivals, all male Israelites were expected to go to the sanctuary with particular sacrifices required for each festival. The cultic calendars, as context for pilgrimage festivals, pointed to what extent religious worship was conducted within the realities of everyday life and they facilitated the cyclical realization of the redemptive acts of God (Bosman, 1997: 20). The *hag* constituted joyful commemoration designed to preserve solidarity with redemptive acts of

God in the past whilst enhancing a social obligation towards those in need in the present (Bosman, 1997: 20). Each *hag* therefore entailed a backward look to God's acts in the past and a focus on the present with its diversity of human needs. In a sense, each pilgrimage opened a window by which to better comprehend God's grace. At the same time it also pointed to the ethical imperatives that follow the experience of God's grace in human life.

One other common element that brings thematic unity to the three annual festivals is the use of the symbolic *number seven*. The Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Booths lasted seven days each whilst the Feast of Harvest occurred seven weeks after the barley harvest. Of the numbers that carry symbolic meaning in biblical usage, seven is the most important (Ryken and Wilhoit, 1998: 774). This number is literally woven into the Biblical calendar and signifies completeness or totality (Ryken and Wilhoit, 1998: 774). The basis for such use of the number seven lies in the seven day week, which, according to Genesis 2:1-3 belongs to the God-given structure of creation and the fact that God completed His work of creation in seven days (Ryken and Wilhoit, 1998: 774). A considerable number of examples of the number seven as representing completeness are available. The sprinkling of the blood of sacrifice seven times (Lev 16:14, 19) indicates complete purification (Ryken and Wilhoit, 1998: 774). The seven eyes of the LORD that range through the whole earth (Zech, 4: 14), indicate the completeness of God's sight of everything in His creation.

Since seven is the number of completeness, a specific series of seven can function as a representation of the whole. Hence, one can say that seven days constitute a whole unit of time.

From the examples given about the significance of the number seven, it is clear that the three annual feasts are in one way or another theologically associated with concepts of completeness, wholeness, being different from ordinary time and also as marking climactic events of Israel's annual calendar. The three major festivals to be discussed below are: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest and the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles).

### **2.2.1 Feast of unleavened bread**

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread is the first of three annual festivals mentioned in connection with the instruction requiring all men of Israel to appear in the presence of the Sovereign LORD (Exod 23:17).

Exodus 23:15 enjoined the following requirement “*Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread: for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I command you. Do this at the appointed time in the month you came out of Egypt. No one is to appear before me empty handed.*”

According to Childs (1974: 483), the Feast of Unleavened Bread (*hammasot*) lasted for seven days in the month of Abib and marked the beginning of the barley harvest in the spring. The seven days most likely pointed to the completeness of the redemption God had accomplished on behalf of Israel. This festival commemorated the exodus from Egypt (Exod 13:3f; Deut. 16:3). On a secondary level, Childs (1974: 484) stated that the feast is connected to the hasty nature of the departure from Egypt which gave no time for leavening of the dough (Exod 12:34). Houtman (2000: 260) is of the view that the feast of Unleavened Bread was celebrated in remembrance of the exodus out of Egypt.

Bacchiocchi's (2002) remarks on the Feast of Unleavened Bread indicate that this feast was connected to the Feast of the Passover, since its observance begun the day after Passover (2002: 34). During the seven days of the feast, only unleavened bread could be eaten. The partaking of the unleavened bread reminded the Israelites that God had delivered them from the Egyptian bondage so that they might live a life free from physical and spiritual bondage. They were to be consecrated to the work of God who had called them to a life of holiness (Bacchiocchi, 2002: 34).

Brueggemann (1994: 777) preferred to comment on the Feast of Unleavened Bread as it is stated in Exodus 12 and 13. In his remarks on the feast as discussed in Exodus 12, he points out three items: Firstly, it was important for every Israelite family to have unleavened bread. Secondly, this special diet was to be followed in all generations. Thirdly, anyone who chose to violate this practice and used leavened bread was to be cut off from the covenant community.

The reason unleavened bread was to be used, was that the slaves left in a hurry and did not have time to wait until the yeast worked and the bread rose. Anybody who used leavened bread during the festival demonstrated that he was not participating in the urgency of the memory. The festival was a reminder of a hurried departure from bondage (Brueggemann, 1994: 785). It was further designed to keep Israel in touch with its difficult past, so that it would always acknowledge that its present situation of well-being needed to evoke gratitude to God.

The scholars so far cited, agree that the Feast of Unleavened bread served to point back to the historic event of the exodus; that the feast spoke of the hasty manner in which the Israelites left Egypt; and lastly, that the feast was designed to facilitate a transmission of the knowledge of God's work for Israel in the past from one generation to another generation.

I would like to suggest that the Feast of Unleavened Bread did more than point Israel to her past deliverance from Egypt, the land of bondage. It also called Israel to focus on her present freedom in the land of her heritage. Just as the land of Egypt symbolised slavery and bondage that were to be shunned, the land of Israel symbolised freedom and prosperity that were to be guarded and cherished both on the national level and on the family level.

### **2.2.2 The Feast of Harvest**

The Feast of Harvest, along with the Feast of Ingathering was tied to the seasons of the year and specifically, was meant to celebrate the conclusion of the harvest (Houtman, 2000: 260). This feast was set seven weeks after the harvest of barley grain according to Deuteronomy 16:9 and was also called *The Feast of Weeks* (Houtman, 2000: 260; Bacchiocchi, 2002: 38) and later on known as '*Pentecost*' (Childs, 1974: 484; Houtman, 2000: 260). This festival took place seven weeks after the barley harvest, most likely as God's way of reminding the nation of Israel that the blessings of harvest they were about to enjoy were tied to the same God who created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. The seventh week in which the nation enjoyed the fruits of the land somehow corresponded with the seventh day on which God rested and bestowed his blessing. With this feast, God declared that he had chosen to work with the number seven as a number of symbolic significance for Him. The feast celebrated the spring harvest (Bacchiocchi, 2002: 38).

In my view, the Feast of Harvest pointed clearly to the vital place of land in the life of the Israelites. The harvest which the people celebrated at this time was the product of the land, without which there could have been no harvest. In order of importance, the Israelites needed to thank God firstly for the land and then for the crops which were the produce of the land.

Celebrants had to embark on a pilgrimage to a place belonging to YHWH which could have been a local shrine, a favourite shrine far away or a central shrine for all Israel (Houtman, 2000: 260). Open air sanctuaries were used as centres for worship but Shiloh served as the main centre of worship in pre-monarchic times, while the temple in Jerusalem assumed the central role in worship during the period of the monarchy (Bosman, 1997: 20). The temple in

Jerusalem was further popularised as the centre for sacrifice when local shrines were abolished in Josiah's time (Bosman, 1997: 20). This meant that in the period of the monarchy, Jerusalem became a pilgrimage centre where the important feasts of the Jewish nation were held.

Worshippers brought the first fruits (*bikkurim*) during this feast and these were presented as a thank offering to God and for purpose of supporting the priesthood (Bosman, 1997: 657-8). Apart from being income for priests, the first fruits were possibly used for burnt offerings with some of them being eaten by the worshippers in the presence of the LORD (Houtman, 2000: 261). The period of the feast was marked by thanksgiving to the LORD for His bountiful provisions (Bacchiocchi, 2002: 38).

This festival had no historical significance attached to it in the Old Testament but later Jewish tradition regarded it as commemorating the giving of the Law at Sinai in the third month after the Exodus from Egypt (Childs, 1974: 484; Bacchiocchi, 2002: 38).

The Harvest festival stood for two important theological concepts, namely that God is the Provider and the Lawgiver. As Provider, He gave Israel land and on an annual basis, He provided for people's needs for food throughout the land. The Feast of Harvest in essence symbolised that land was very important and needed to be guarded jealously because on it rested the livelihood of the nation at large and individual families as well.

### **2.2.3 Feast of the Booths (Tabernacles)**

The Feast of Booths was also known as the *Feast of Ingathering* or *Feast of Tabernacles* (Harrison, 1988: 786). The Hebrew term for booths, namely '*sukkot*', is used in the Old Testament as referring to a thicket used as a lion's den (Job 38:40) or to a temporary shelter such as a hut (Lev 23:43) (Bosman, 1997: 249). The Hebrew expression *Hag Hassukot* literally translates as Festival of Huts from which the concept of Feast of Booths (Bosman, 1997: 249) was constructed. It was a most joyous occasion and rendered in the Latin Vulgate as *Tabernacula* (Bacchiocchi, 2002: 45). With reference to the harvest, it is called the Feast of Ingathering because it was a thanksgiving celebration concerning the blessings of the harvest. With reference to the history of Israel, it is called the Feast of Booths because it commemorated God's protection of His people as they dwelt in booths during their sojourn in the wilderness (Bacchiocchi, 2002: 45; Bosman, 1997: 250).

The first day as well as the last day of the week was set apart as days of rest (Harrison, 1988: 786). The entire week was characterised by large numbers of sacrifices being offered to the LORD (Harrison, 1988: 786; Bacchiocchi, 2002: 45). The sacrifices were given in thankfulness to God who had given the nation a bountiful harvest (Bacchiocchi, 2002: 45). The celebrations were also marked with the recital of the law (Harrison, 1988: 786).

Harrison (1988: 786), Bosman (1997: 249) and Bacchiocchi's (2002: 45) discussions on the Feast of Tabernacles have revealed that the same feast was called *Hag Hassukot* in Hebrew. This feast occurred shortly after the Day of Atonement and was a one-week event. It was characterised by the giving of many offerings and people for the entire duration of the feast dwelt in booths made of branches of trees. It probably symbolised YHWH's fullness of blessing and evoked the people's wholeness of gratitude to God. The mood of the feast was one of joy and thanksgiving. It symbolised divine protection, reconciliation between God and humankind.

Again one notes that the Feast of Tabernacles celebrated God's divine protection in the context of God's agricultural provisions which were the fruit of the land. The God who in the historic past had protected them in the wilderness, had seen them through yet another agricultural year successfully. The bountiful sacrifices the Israelites brought at this time were ample evidence that God, through the land, had provided for the people's needs again. The question to be answered at this point has got to do with the pertinence of the three annual festivals for the Sabbath year. These festivals, like the Sabbath year, were all festive commemorations; times set apart to honour God for what He had done for them (Israel) in the historic past in bringing deliverance to them from Egypt or giving them protection during their sojourn in the wilderness or in the giving of the Law at Sinai. The festivals also celebrated God's present deliverances and protection.

These festivals, though not identical to each other or to the Sabbath year, were built around a common theological purpose - to honour God for what He had done in their lives. In other words, these festivals were not just political or social gatherings. They were religious in character with YHWH at the centre of their activities. More than being just religious, the festivals celebrated by the children of Israel, together amounted to a collective commemoration that not only helped the Israelites to strengthen their relationship to God but also enhanced their sense of identity as a people.

These three festivals like the Sabbath year shared in the common use of the number seven. As stated earlier, the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of Booths each lasted seven days, whilst the Feast of Harvest occurred seven weeks after the barley harvest. The Sabbath year was in itself the seventh year in a cycle of seven. Suggested in this common usage of the number seven, is the theological unity of these festivals and their common acknowledgment of the completeness of God's intervention in the affairs of His people.

The three annual feasts discussed above, had theological perspectives underlying their origin, purpose and practice and these are the elements that formed the theological background of the Sabbath year in the Covenant Code. The next subsection of this chapter identifies and briefly discusses these theological perspectives.

## **2.3 THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GOD EMANATING FROM THE ANNUAL FESTIVALS**

### **2.3.1 God as Redeemer**

The Feast of Unleavened Bread pointed to God as Redeemer. Cassuto (1953: 303) states that the Feast of Unleavened Bread signified Israel's exodus from Egypt. Cole (1973: 180) pointed out that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was a memorial of the historic event of the exodus from Egypt.

Theologically, the Feast of Unleavened Bread pointed to God as a Deliverer who came at a dark hour of Israel's bondage in Egypt from which she could not liberate herself. God acted on Israel's behalf - delivering her from the burden of oppression. God wanted this picture of Himself to remain in Israel's memory and on that account He instituted the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As in each year Israel gathered to celebrate this feast it served as an acknowledgement that there was a time in her life when she was doomed to perish due to oppression and God came at that time and saved her.

### **2.3.2 God as Provider**

The Harvest Festival, as clearly attested by scholars, was a celebration conducted in honour of what God had done for Israel as a nation to provide them with a bountiful harvest. The Feast was marked with giving praises to God for providing the people with food for the next year and for the assurance of His love and care. At a deeper level, the people thanked God for

the land which made agricultural life and animal life possible. During this Feast the people acknowledged the fact that God did not redeem them so as to abandon them but that He followed up the work of redemption with the work of providence.

### **2.3.3 God as Lawgiver**

The Harvest Festival was also associated with the giving of the law at Mt Sinai. This reality is advocated by Jewish tradition and confirmed by Biblical data (Bacchiocchi, 2002: 38 and Childs, 1974: 484). Cole (1973: 179) also asserted that the Feast of Harvest was commemorative of the law-giving event at Sinai. A point one can take from the general consensus of these scholars is that the Feast of Harvest pointed to the important theological truth that God is not only a Liberator; He is also a Lawgiver.

According to Sarna (1991: 145), the giving of the law at Sinai expressed a fundamental idea of freedom: that liberation and freedom must be granted in and controlled by law. He further pointed out that God's purpose in liberating the Israelites from Egypt was to create a community of people who could accept the law that constituted the basis of their Redeemer's government as the basis of their own life. By giving Israel the law as a nation, God was telling Israel that He had not liberated them so that they could develop into an anarchist system where each person would do what seemed right in His own eyes.

An understanding of God's law keeps humanity in constant awareness that they exist in relation to the Divine King of the universe. It was Veloso (2000) who said: "The law showed that God gave Himself to Israel to be their God and elected them to be His possession (Exod 19:4-6). It was a moral, ethical, social and cultic monument. But the law was not a monument to be stationed in some prominent place; rather, it was a living monument. Although written in stone, God wanted to locate it in the hearts of His people (Ps 37:30; Jer 31:33) so it could rule the entire life of every individual of the whole nation and even all humanity" (2000: 458).

The Harvest Festival stands as a pointer to the great theological perspective that says that God is the great Lawgiver who after delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage gave that nation His divine law so that it could order their life in the land of freedom. Actually it was the gift of the law that would give people the guarantee of peace and security in the land of which they inherited. Life lived without the law, even in the land of heritage, would easily degenerate and resemble the dreadful Egyptian experience.



### **2.3.4 God as Divine Protector**

Bacchiocchi (2002: 45) pointed out that the Feast of Tabernacles was also called the “Feast of Booths” because it commemorated God’s protection of the people as they dwelt in booths during their forty year sojourn in the wilderness. Nichol and Cottrell (1953: 628) described the Feast of Booths as a season of gladness and thanksgiving for the final gathering in of the autumn harvest and the commemoration of the safe passage of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan. The Feast of Booths, according to many scholars, pointed to God as the Protector who enabled Israel to make it safely from Egypt to Canaan.

Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness for forty years clearly pointed to God as a refuge and fortress of protection. God protected the Israelites from Pharaoh’s attack at the Red Sea. (Exod 14:5-28), and He protected Israel from the attacks of the Amalekites (Exod 17:8-15) and gave Israel victory over a Canaanite king of Arad (Num21:1-3); and over Sihon king of Og (Num 21:21-30) and other enemies they met on the way.

The Feast of Tabernacles was designed to remind humans that they are not the source of their own protection - God is. Israel had to be reminded annually that her protection was in the LORD, not in human made structures of self protection. The God who provided security for Israel in the wilderness was also there to give His protection to Israel in the land of their heritage.

As I have already mentioned, the Feast of Tabernacles came a few days after the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement was the time when the sins of the nation were cleansed and removed symbolically from the midst of Israel (Lev 16). The joy that accompanied the feast of Booths was associated in part to the fact that their sins were forgiven and that the people were now at peace with God (Nichol and Cottrell, 1953: 628). Although the Day of Atonement was not one of the three agricultural feast days which are the focus of this discussion, yet because of its proximity to the Feast of Booths, the effects of the mood it set definitely cannot be ignored. It is obvious that one of the reasons why the Feast of Tabernacles was such a joyous occasion was because of the spirit of reconciliation that had been brought about between God and Israel and between each Israelite person with his/her fellowhumans on the Day of Atonement. This spirit of reconciliation was carried into the Feast of Tabernacles.

### **2.3.4 God as Keeper of the Covenant**

Of the three annual feasts of Israel, the Feast of Tabernacles is the only one in which the covenant was renewed by the reading of the law. Harrison (1988: 787) pointed out that every seventh year, the observances were marked by a renewal of the covenant to which the Israelites under Moses had committed themselves, and this ceremony was designed to keep fresh in their minds the obligations as well as the blessings of the covenant relationship. The renewal of the covenant implied that the God who instituted the covenant was in the first place also still faithful in fulfilling His part of the covenant.

The renewal of the covenant also served to remind the Israelites that they were in the land primarily because God had remained faithful to the covenant which He had made with Abraham. In the covenant with Abraham God promised him that He would give his children the land of Canaan as their home (Gen 15).

## **2.4 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, a number of theological perspectives emanating from the three annual feasts have been identified. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was instituted to commemorate Israel's deliverance from Egypt and hence pointed to God as Redeemer who delivered Israel from the land of bondage to lead her to a land of freedom, Canaan. The Feast of the Harvest pointed to God as Provider on account of the fact that the primary reason for the people to gather on this occasion was to thank God for the harvest God had given them.

The Feast of Harvest was also associated with the giving of the law at Mount Sinai and hence points to God as Lawgiver. The God who delivered Israel not only gave her a land of freedom but He also gave Israel the Law to govern her in the land of freedom.

The Feast of Tabernacles, because of its closeness to the Day of Atonement, and because of the large number of sacrifices that characterised the Feast of Tabernacles itself, was seen as pointing to God as a God of reconciliation. The same feast was associated with God's protection over Israel in the wilderness and therefore pointed to God as Protector both in the past, the present and the future.

The Feast of Tabernacles also points to God as Keeper of the Covenant because it is during this feast in the seventh year that the ceremony of renewing the covenant between God and

Israel was renewed by a reading of the Law, reminding Israel of her covenant obligations. This feast also reminded Israel of God's faithfulness to the covenant promises which He made to Abraham concerning the inheritance of the land.

The Sabbath year had these theological perspectives as its background. These insights mentioned thus far will be useful in the next chapter, where I investigate the legal motivations of the Sabbath year and some theological trends in the Covenant and Deuteronomic Codes in this regard.

## CHAPTER 3

### MOTIVATIONS OF THE SABBATH YEAR AND THEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE COVENANT AND DEUTERONOMIC CODES

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to accomplish two things: the identification of the motivations of the Sabbath year in the Covenant and Deuteronomic codes and an investigation of some theological trends in each of these codes.

#### 3.2 COVENANT CODE

In order to determine the motivations of the Sabbath year in the Covenant Code I will investigate two passages that discuss the Sabbath year in Exodus, namely Exodus 21:2-6 and Exodus 23:10-11. Afterwards, I will discuss the theological trends in the Covenant Code and then in the Book of Exodus at large. With the insights gained from the motivations in the texts investigated and the theological trends in the Covenant Code and the Book of Exodus, I will then be in a position to conclude how the Sabbath year theology impacted on the retention of land within the family.

##### 3.2.1 Exodus 21:2-6

The first text under investigation is Exodus 21:2-6 because it deals with the release of slaves in the seventh year.

Exodus 21:2: *“If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything.”*

Exodus 21:1-11 constitutes concepts which may be categorised as ‘slave law’ and such laws sought to regulate the treatment of slaves within Israel (Childs, 1974: 467). The term ‘Hebrew’ according to Childs (1974: 468) was originally a pejorative designation of a legal or social status within the ancient Near Eastern society of the second millennium (Childs, 1974: 467). This ‘slave law’ is presented in a classic casuistic style. The Law stipulated that the release of a Hebrew slave was supposed to be effected after six years. The term ‘Hebrew’

is also a technical term and designated a social status of a person free of bondage, but somewhat below that of a full citizen (Childs, 1974: 468).

In Durham's (1987) view, Exodus 21:2-11 is a text which deals with the treatment of slaves, both male and female (1987: 320). The term '*Hebrew*,' according to him referred to a slave with a certain hope of freedom after a set term of servitude. Like Childs (1974: 467), Durham also asserted that a Hebrew slave was someone who was less than a full citizen but also more than merely a slave. At the end of six years such a slave was to go free without any financial cost to himself, presumably with the status of full citizenship.

The law in Exodus 21:2-6 is concerned with fellow countrymen who became slaves, and not with slaves of foreign origin. An Israelite could sell himself into slavery since the law allowed this practice (Houtman, 2000: 115). The general rule was that after six years of service such a slave could become a free human being again.

These three scholars all agree that a Hebrew slave was supposed to go free after six years with Childs (1974: 468) suggesting that such freedom did not enable one to achieve full citizenship, whilst Durham (1987: 321) and Houtman (2000: 115) argued for total freedom of the slave in the seventh year. It is not easy to accurately describe the extent of the freedom such a slave received in the seventh year. It is however reasonable to assume that Hebrew slaves, by virtue of being citizens of Israel by birth, were accorded full citizenship upon being released in the Sabbath year.

In Exodus 21:3 it is stated: " <i>If he comes alone, he is to go free alone, but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him.</i> "
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With regards to this law, Childs (1974: 468) states that if a single man came into a state of servitude he was supposed to leave single, but if he entered into slavery as a married person, he was to leave with his wife. If the master provided a wife for the man, the wife and children remained with the master in the year of release. There was a sense of cruel inconsistency between this stipulation and the concept of marriage in Genesis 2:24 (Childs, 1974: 468). If the wife was married to the man by permission of the owner, such a wife and her children were the owner's property and in the year of release they remained with the owner (Durham, 1987: 321). In the Old Testament period it was assumed that a woman was the property of a man (Houtman, 2000: 116). If a man was married when he entered slavery, it meant he had property rights over the woman who came with him. But if the woman came as a gift from

the master, then the master's property rights were more important than those of the husband. At the time of release, such a woman and her children remained the property of the master.

In terms of Exodus 21:4 the consensus of the three scholars cited above, is that a man who came alone left alone at the time of release. If he came married he would leave with his wife. A concept that throws light into the plight of women is the one which says women were regarded as men's property and in the year of release they could either be released or kept in servitude depending on who owned them. The law on slave release (Exod 21:2-6) was given at a national level but the implementation took place at the individual and familial level. This law contains germinal elements of social and economic liberation within the family because it allowed a man who came into slavery with his wife to depart with the wife during the seventh year of release.

Exodus 21:5 reads: *"But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and I do not want to go free...'"*

There was another option offered in the law of slave release. A man who loved his master and his wife and children could renounce his right of release and remain a slave on a permanent basis (Childs, 1974: 468). He then needed to swear an oath of loyalty to his owner and to his family before the judges would forgo his right of seventh-year release (Durham, 1987: 321). A man like this who liked his sheltered life with his master and his wife and children was supposed to openly declare that he was waiving his right to freedom (Houtman, 2000: 116).

The emerging trend in Exodus 21:5 is that a slave who chose to remain in slavery because he loved his master, his wife and his children had to declare it openly before his master and his family. The important thing to note here is that at least the occurrence of a year of release gave him the freedom to choose.

Exodus 21:6 *"Then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life."*

After a servant made a public declaration of intent to become a permanent slave, he was taken to the nearest sanctuary for a judgement and was then marked with a sign of servitude for the rest of his life (Childs, 1974: 469). This event constituted a formal ceremony which followed a person's disavowal to return to a status of freedom (Durham, 1987: 469). The ceremony required the owner to bring the man into the Presence of God at the sanctuary. His

ear was supposed to be pierced by the master with the use of an awl. The piercing of the ear according to Durham (1987: 321) was a public indication of permanent slavery on account of his devotion to his family. Houtman (2000: 118) argues at length for the idea that the marking of the slave took place at the house of the owner. The exercise has also been interpreted to mean that the slave from then on was willing to listen and obey his master and that is why the piercing of the ear had to take place at the house of the owner (Houtman, 2000: 118).

The truth, it seems, is that the man who chose servitude was driven by both love for his family and the willingness to obey the owner. He obviously saw it as a better option to remain in slavery with his family than to go into freedom abandoning his family.

The motivation for this legislation was clearly the release of Hebrew slaves and this motivation harmonises well with the theological portrayal of God as Redeemer as presented in the discussion of the Feast of Unleavened Bread in Chapter 2.

I will consider the literary context of Exodus 21:2-6 in two parts, namely Exodus 20:22 to 21:1, and Exodus 21:7-11.

Exodus 20:22-26 are laws where God instructs Israel not to make idols for themselves and He also instructs Israel on the erection of acceptable types of altars. These two laws point to the reality that God is jealous about His name and also particular about the approach His people were to use in coming to Him in worship. These regulations suggest that the God of ‘slave release’ was also a demanding God and expected His people to take His instructions seriously.

Exodus 21:7-11 deals with female servants. According to Childs (1974: 469), female slaves did not go free after six years as male slaves did. However, a female slave enjoyed certain fundamental rights. She could be ransomed by her own people and could not be sold to foreigners. The female slave was to be accorded the privileges of a daughter. If she had become her master’s wife, it was required that she be maintained with her full marital rights. These insights demonstrate that the God who instituted the slave release law was concerned about the rights of both male and female slaves. The law sought to protect the dignity of both groups of slaves.

### 3.2.2 Exodus 23:10-11

I begin the discussion by focussing on Exodus 23:10-11.

In Exodus 23: 10 one reads: *“For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops.”*

After six years of cultivation and harvest, land was to be left alone for a year (Durham, 1987: 331). The terms sowing and harvesting include all terms for work in the field during various seasons (Houtman, 2000: 255). This suggests that work was supposed to go on in different forms in the fields during six years. The emphasis on the need to work the fields for six years helps one to see the necessity of including it in the definition of the Sabbath year in the Covenant Code.

Exodus 23:11 continues: *“But during the seventh year let the land lie unploughed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.”*

In the seventh year, no crop was to be sown; the land was allowed to lie fallow and rest (Childs, 1974: 482). The two Hebrew words in verse 11, namely *shemittah* (let drop) and *nts'* (leave, abandon) are almost synonymous. The term *shemittah* is elsewhere used to refer to the concept of remission of debt. Childs (1974: 482) further states that it is not clear in the Covenant Code whether the Sabbath year was simultaneously observed as prescribed in the Holiness Code. Concerning the motivation for the Sabbath year in the Covenant Code, Childs (1974: 482) argued that a social motivation came to the fore. Whatever grew by itself was to be regarded as food for the poor and wild animals.

The Sabbath year was also known as the “sabbatical year” and in this year whatever the land produced on its own, and through no human effort, was allocated to the poor of the land (Durham, 1987: 331). What the poor did not eat, was to be food for wild animals. Houtman (2000: 256) does not refer to the Sabbath year in any specific way. He cites other scholars who referred to the Sabbath year as ‘Sabbatical year’ or ‘seventh year’. In his discussion, he indicates that crops which grew on fallow land were not considered cultural products but natural products which were freely accessible to anyone. In the Sabbath year, land was not to be touched at all but was to be left alone. The beneficiaries of self-growth during the Sabbath year were the needy Israelites and wild animals (Houtman, 2000: 256).



According to the three scholars cited above, the conspicuous trends concerning the Sabbath year in connection with Exodus 23:10-11 are:

- Necessity of the land to rest in the Sabbath year.
- The Sabbath year is here motivated by a concern for the poor.

The Sabbath year law (Exod 23:10-11), though promulgated at the national level, could be implemented at the familial level because it was the individual family who would ensure that their land was not ploughed in the Sabbath year and that the poor were allowed access to the usufruct of the land. The literary context of the Sabbath year in the Covenant Code consists of two parts, namely Exodus 23:1-9 which precedes the Sabbath year text and Exodus 23:12-13 which comes immediately after the Sabbath year text. Exodus 23:1-9 determined appropriate conduct for people appearing before courts of law. These laws, like the slave release year, were concerned with the social wellbeing of all people. Exodus 23:12-13 on the other hand is made up of cultic laws. The Sabbath day legislation, in both structure and content had much in common with the seventh year of release. They share the same structure and similar social and environmental concerns whilst the law prohibiting the mentioning of idols (Exod 23:13) shares a monotheistic concern with the Sabbath year.

The Sabbath year in the Covenant Code had a social motivation, namely concern for the poor and this motivation harmonises well with the portrayal of God as Provider, as discussed in the section on the Feast of Harvest in Chapter 2.

### **3.2.3 Theological trends in the Covenant Code**

In this section the aim is to investigate the theological trends within the Covenant Code.

According to Houtman (2000: 81) the Covenant Code material may be structured as follows.

- I. Exodus 20:22-26; Stipulations of Serving YHWH.
- II. Exodus 21:1-22:16; *Mishpatim*.
- III. Exodus 22:17-23:12; Cultic and Social Stipulations.
- IV. Exodus 23: 13-19; Stipulations for Serving YHWH.

According to Fretheim (2003: 95), a straightforward analysis of the Covenant Code yields the following structure:

- I. Exodus 20:22-26 Instructions Concerning the Making of Cultic Objects.
- II. Exodus 21:1-22:20 Regulatory Principles *or Mishpatim*
- III. Exodus 22:21-23:9 Exhortations
- IV. Exodus 23:10-19 Instructions Concerning the Sabbath and Religious Festivals
- V. Exodus 23:20-33 Promises and Warnings Concerning the Land of Canaan.

Fretheim's (2003: 95) structure is preferable to me because its subheadings are more explicit than those of Houtman (2000: 81), which are rather too generalized. Fretheim (2003: 95) also included Exodus 23:20-33, which Houtman (2000: 81) left out in his structure. At the same time, I think the third subheading of Fretheim's (2003: 95) structure is also too generalized and needs to be more specific and for that reason I will rephrase it and the resulting working structure will be as follows:

- 3.2.3.1 Exodus 20:22-26 Instructions Concerning the Making of Cultic Objects
- 3.2.3.2 Exodus 21:1-22:20 Regulatory Principles *or Mishpatim*
- 3.2.3.3 Exodus 22:21-23:9 Cultic and Social Stipulations
- 3.2.3.4 Exodus 23:10-19 Instructions Concerning the Sabbath and Religious Festivals

The choices one has in investigating the theological trends of each section are twofold: the close reading approach where one takes one verse after the other and closely study the literature related to its contents, or one can use the approach of discussing themes of each respective section one after the other. The limited scope of this study renders the close reading approach, whilst with the second approach of discussing themes, the problem is that unlike in situations where scholars are discussing the theology of a whole Bible book and may prefer to use the thematic approach, most scholars, in discussing chapters of a book or subsections of a chapter, prefer to use the verse by verse commentary approach. For this reason, to achieve the goal of this study, I prefer to use an approach that covers all subsections but remains practically feasible in the scope of this research. The approach I

propose to use is one where a sample verse or verses are chosen from each subsection and subjected to close reading. This approach will assist in establishing the general trends of the subsection.

### **3.2.3.1 Instructions concerning the making of cultic objects (Exodus 20:22-26)**

In this subsection, because it has a few verses, I will subject the entire section to close reading.

The passage under consideration is Exodus 20:22-26: *“Then the LORD said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites this: ‘You have seen yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven: Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold. Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honoured, I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. And do not go up to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.”*

The first cultic law I look into is the one which prohibited the making of gods to stand alongside YHWH, whether these gods were of silver or gods of gold (Exod 20:23). This law was an emphatic command against setting idol gods in rivalry to YHWH since YHWH was Israel’s only God (Durham, 1987: 319). This prohibition against making idols and the instructions for building of altars together focus on the subject of how the divine presence was to be experienced by the people in the future (Fretheim, 2003: 96). This law in summary conveyed to Israel the point that YHWH alone is God and is the only one they should worship if they were to constantly enjoy His Presence.

The second cultic law called on Israel to make an altar of earth for Him and sacrifice on it burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. The LORD then promised: *‘wherever I cause my name to be honoured, I will come and bless you.’* (Exod 20:24). The essence of this commandment is the message that YHWH Himself would choose the place where altars of sacrifice would be built and that He would come in person to His people assembled and bless them (Durham, 1987: 319). The altars were not supposed to be constructed at will, except in those places where God had revealed His name and only these would be legitimate places of worship (Childs, 1974: 466). God’s blessings were assured to Israel on condition they

worshipped Him through the offering of sacrifices on altars but not through the construction of metallic images (Fretheim, 2003: 522).

God required altars to be made of earth and to be at places He Himself would choose. If the Israelites conducted their sacrifices in such places and avoided idolatry and worshipped YHWH alone as God, His blessings would come upon Israel.

The command against climbing up an altar with steps was an anti-Canaanite law (Durham, 1987: 320). In Childs' (1974) view, the prohibition was directed against adopting Canaanite altars which were made of finished stone (1974: 466). Fretheim (2003: 97) argued that these laws were appropriate since the whole thrust of the Sinai covenant was the establishment of a special relationship between God and Israel.

The consensus of scholars cited above, suggests that the prohibition of using carved out stones was necessitated by the fact that it was a Canaanite practice. Israelites were supposed to worship YHWH differently from the way the Canaanites worshipped their deities. According to the scholars cited the instructions on making cultic objects pointed to YHWH as the only God who demanded to be worshipped in a particular way by His people Israel if His blessings were to follow them. In other words, Israel's security in the land and her prosperity as a nation depended on how the people approached God in worship.

YHWH's demand to be worshipped as the only God implied that He alone was supposed to rule in every sphere of Israel's life, which entailed the political, the social, the economic and the religious. In other words, when it came to the economic sphere which included property ownership and land, human beings were not supposed to regard themselves as ultimate owners with absolute control, but they had to reckon with the reality of God's sovereignty in all these matters.

The law against idolatry and worshipping in non-Canaanite style (Exod 20: 22-23) was given at national level but it was to be implemented at the individual, familial level or community level because this is the level where decisions to obey or to disobey God took place.

One can conclude that whereas the laws against idolatry pointed to YHWH alone as God, to be glorified in life, the Sabbath year was the special temple in time set apart to contemplate about Him and worship Him alone as God. The Law against idolatry and the Sabbath year Law called the nation of Israel to strict monotheism, the acknowledgement and the

worshipping of YHWH alone as God. The Sabbath year, as time set apart by God for divine use, was meant to challenge the people to do away with any other deities. Idolatry in its most common form of manmade gods was to be done away with. Idolatry in its subtle form as the obsession of a person's life with something to the point where that object or thing dethrones God from His proper place in life was also to be done away with. In this way the Sabbath year stood as a bulwark against the idols of materialism that drive men and women to use inhuman means to acquire material possessions. These are practices that received sharp prophetic indictments in the eighth century in the following words. "Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no place is left and you live alone in the land. The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearings: 'Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants. A ten acre vineyard will produce only a bath of wine, a homer of seed only an ephah of grain.'" (Isa 5:8-10; see also Amos 5:11-12).

### 3.2.3.2 Regulatory principles '*mishpatim*' (Exodus 21:1-22:20)

As indicated in the discussion on structure, this section covers material from Exodus 21:1-22:20, making a total of fifty verses. For the purpose of analysis, I shall not discuss this section on a verse by verse basis since such an exercise would be far beyond the scope of this study. The verses I will make use of as a sample of regulatory principles are found in Exodus 21:22-24 which constitute the much debated *lex talionis* law:

*"If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise."*

According to Childs (1974: 471), verse 22 begins in typical casuistic style and deals with the case of the injury of a pregnant woman which was inflicted in a brawl. If there was no fatal bodily injury involved, the compensation could be fixed by the woman's husband on the basis of an assessment agreed upon by an objective third party (Childs, 1974: 471 and Durham, 1987: 323). In the event that a permanent injury was inflicted on the woman or, presumably to the child she was carrying, equal injury was to be inflicted upon the one who caused it (Durham, 1987: 323). The principle involved was that a sort of retribution for the injury be exacted (Childs, 1987: 471). Houtman (2000: 166) went so far as to claim that this law was to be taken in a literal sense. By literal sense he meant that if an offender killed

someone's wife, the law did not demand the life of the offender himself but the life of his wife.

The law of retaliation (*lex talionis*), if it operated in that way, would be the most unjust law as it would mean killing an innocent woman because of the crime of her husband. I therefore disagree with Houtman's literalistic interpretation (2000: 166). Childs (1974: 471) and Durham (1987: 323) who saw the offender as the one who directly received the punishment for the crime he committed are to me more in line with the true meaning of the text.

This law has been roundly condemned as a cruel law (Childs, 1974: 472). It has indeed been considered a very primitive kind of penalty and a true reflection of barbaric law (Durham, 1987: 324). According to Childs (1974: 472) there has been a shift with respect to criticism towards this law. Basing his argument on recent legal studies, Childs (1974: 472) concluded that the effect of the law of *lex talionis* was to provide protection to members of the inferior social standing since the wealthy could no longer escape punishment for the crime by simply paying a fine. The principle of the *talion* hence marked an important advance in the history of law and was far from being an indication of a primitive system. In Durham's assessment, the introduction of the law of the *talion* was designed to remedy the foreseeable abuses made possible by monetary payment for physical injury (1987: 324).

With these observations, one can conclude that the *lex talionis*, far from being a cruel primitive law, was a law that demonstrated how much Israelite law valued and sought to protect the human body from physical abuse. This law is but just a sample demonstrating that the regulatory principles (*mishpatim*) within the Covenant Code regarded the human body as important and deserving protection. The suffering of the body obviously meant the suffering of the person. The *lex talionis* was against human suffering and portrays a God of compassion and care and prepared to protect every one of His children from all forms of suffering. The God portrayed by the *lex talionis* is a Protector God, the God portrayed by the Feast of Tabernacles as discussed in Chapter 2. The God who protected Israel in the wilderness instituted the Law of *lex talionis* to protect vulnerable members of the society from abuse by the economically strong people.

With regards to the Sabbath year, I think this law implied that the Sabbath year as a law within the Covenant Code was intended firstly to be a law sensitive to human suffering and seek to protect people from suffering. Secondly, since the God of the *lex talionis* law was

compassionate, the Sabbath year also needed to portray a God of compassion and concerned with human suffering.

With regards to land, I think it is most reasonable to see the God who protected the bodily welfare of an individual proceeding further to protect the economic welfare of the same person. Just as God took a hard stand against those who inflicted bodily injury to other persons, I see God in the same vein taking a similar stand against those who sought to rob other people of their land. The Sabbath year was also there to provide time for restful reflection and inculcation of the protective love of God which would equip people to stand with God to protect the vulnerable members of society whose land was being grabbed by the ruthless elements in society.

### **3.2.3.3 Cultic and social stipulations (Exodus 22:21-23:9)**

In this section, I will use Exodus 22:10-12 and Exodus 23:12 as sample texts.

Exodus 22:10-12 *“If a man gives a donkey, an ox, a sheep or any other animal to his neighbour for safekeeping and it dies or is injured or is taken away while no one is looking, the issue between them will be settled by taking of an oath before the LORD that the neighbour did not lay hands of the other person’s property. The owner is to accept this and no restitution is required. But if the animal was stolen from the neighbour, he must make restitution to the owner.”*

As accurately pointed out by Childs (1974: 476) these verses treat the case of an injury to an animal which has been deposited for safekeeping. If no one was present to witness the accident, the bailee was supposed to declare his innocence before a judge and was exonerated, the reason being that it lay outside his area of responsibility (Childs, 1974: 476). Durham (1987: 326) says that both the owner of the animal and the trustee were to swear an oath in YHWH’s presence that each was telling the truth. According to Houtman (2000: 203), the shepherd of the livestock was being accused of grave negligence and since there were no witnesses, all the shepherd could do by way of defence against the allegation was to swear by YHWH. The shepherd had to state that he did not abuse the animal so that it died and that he did not steal the animal.

The oath had to do with the guarding of the shepherd’s good name and protect him against claims of restitution (Houtman, 2000: 203). Houtman’s insights are persuasive but the

problem is that the contention as articulated in the text is not between an animal owner and a shepherd but between an animal owner and his neighbour who needed not necessarily to have been a shepherd (2000: 203).

In the event that the animal under someone's custody was stolen, Childs (1974: 476) says that the neighbour keeping the animal was considered responsible and was supposed to make full restitution. Durham (1987: 326) similarly argued that if the loss of the animal through theft occurred because of the negligence of the trustee, the trustee was supposed to pay compensation. Animal theft in Houtman's view can be prevented by taking good care of the animals and so, if the thief is not apprehended, the herdsman did not go free (2000: 204).

I agree with Childs (1974: 476) and Durham (1987: 326) that the neighbour as trustee of a stolen animal was supposed to pay compensation to the owner of the animal. One can conclude that the law regarding the damage to property portrays YHWH as a God of justice who desired to see society living in peace with due respect for each other's property. The fact that God was concerned with how people regarded each other's property even in the form of domestic animals, suggests that He was even more concerned over how they regarded each other's property in the form of important things like family land. This law portrays a God who demanded accountability in small things and demonstrates that the Lawgiver portrayed by the Feast of harvest was keen to see justice executed in the land.

I think the Sabbath year, being a time of spiritual reflection, challenged human beings to be more humane, just and accountable in dealing with one another. More than that, the Sabbath year demanded that within the covenant community, wrongs were to be made right and unjust practises were to be brought to a halt and pave way for peace and harmony in the land. This was so because the Sabbath year, as the great symbol of divine rest, pointed to the reality that true rest of the soul comes only when we have put things right with God and our fellow human beings.

Exodus 22:22-24 *"Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry and my anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword, your wives will become widows and your children fatherless."*

The widow and the orphan were exposed to violence without the support of husband and father (Childs, 1974: 478). The cry of distress from such a person would certainly be heard by YHWH and provoke his furious anger in result of which the offending Israelite would



himself be slain (Durham, 1987: 328). The slain man would leave his wife and children in the same defenceless position as those whom he had maltreated. The cry of the widow and the orphan is to be taken as a prayer directed against the oppressor which God would hear and act upon causing the wives and children of oppressors to become society's outcasts (Houtman, 2000: 226). The Old Testament reveals a particular concern for the poor and God is portrayed as a special Protector for the vulnerable (Childs, 1974: 478).

I see the God portrayed by the law on widows and orphans as a Protector God who in Chapter 2 was depicted in the Feast of Tabernacles. The Sabbath year was meant to depict a God who protects vulnerable members of society like widows, orphans and the poor. In other words, the Sabbath year provided time to challenge members of the covenant community to re-examine their faith in the light of their treatment of the widows, aliens and orphans in their midst. In this way, the Sabbath year was a clarion call for practical godliness among members of the covenant community. The Sabbath year passed judgment on the spiritually insensitive who abused the vulnerable members of the society and it upheld values of love, empathy and care.

#### **3.2.3.4 Instructions concerning the Sabbath and religious festivals (Exodus 23:10-19)**

(This subsection has already been exhaustively discussed in the second chapter as part of theological background material for the Sabbath year).

#### **3.2.4 Theological trends in the Book of Exodus**

A brief look at the theological trends in the entire book of Exodus provides a bigger picture of the character of the God behind the plot of this book. More than that, such a picture helps one to better appreciate how such a God would view the plight of humanity in general and specific issues such as the Sabbath year and maintenance of land in the family which are the subject matter of research in this thesis.

Different scholars have suggested a number of ways in which to structure the book of Exodus. In this section, I shall consider three structures proposed by influential commentators on Exodus.

The proposed structure of the book of Exodus according to Childs (1974), as cited by Carpenter (1997: 607), is as follows:

- I. The Exodus from Egypt (Exod 1:1-15:21)
- II. The Wilderness Journeys (Exod 15:22-18:27)
- III. The Covenant at Sinai and Its Ordinances (Exod 19-40)

Durham (1987: xxx) suggested the following structure:

- I. Israel in Egypt (Exod 1:1-15:21)
- II. Israel in the Wilderness (Exod 13:17-18:27)
- III. Israel at Sinai (Exod 19:1-40:38)

Fretheim (2003: 250-1) suggested the following structure:

- I. Israel in Egypt, Deliverance by God and its Response (Exod 1:1-15:21)
- II. Israel in the Wilderness and God's Providence (Exod 15:22-18:27)
- III. Israel at Sinai (Exod 19:1-40:38)

The proposed structures are similar in dividing the book of Exodus into three subdivisions. The similarity goes further than an equal number of divisions to include even the beginning point and ending point of each subdivision. Another notable feature of the three structures is the fact that each structure mentions three significant places in connection with the experience of Israel. These places include the land of Egypt which represented Israel's bondage from which God delivered her, the wilderness where Israel was faced with physical and spiritual destruction and God miraculously provided for her and Sinai where God entered into covenant with Israel.

These observations point to the fact that the three scholars cited above, concur that the book of Exodus has three clear subdivisions built around significant events that took place in Israel's experience.

The cited scholars proposed the same structure but they named the variously parts differently. The structure proposed by Fretheim (2003: 250-251), which I think is more informative, is both historical and theological in character. To be consistent, I will modify the third subheading so that, like the other two subheadings, it will reflect the theological significance

of the place associated with it. The structure I will work with for the rest of this chapter is as follows:

3.2.4.1. Israel in Egypt, Its Deliverance by God and Its Response (Exodus 1:1-15:21)

3.2.4.2. Israel in The Wilderness and God's Providence (Exodus 15:22-18:27)

3.2.4.3 Israel at Sinai and Ratification of the Covenant with God (Exodus 19:1-40:38)

#### **3.2.4.1 Israel in Egypt; its deliverance by God and its response (Exod 1:1-15:21)**

According to Fretheim (2003: 253), creation is the most basic theological category with which the book of Exodus works. The Creator God enabled Israel to be fruitful and multiply and grow strong in Egypt. Because this creative divine work was being endangered by Pharaoh's genocidal policies, God chose to act in salvation to save creation. This Creator God accomplished Israel's redemption from Egypt. Israel's response to this redemption came in the form of a hymned celebration filled with creation vocabulary (Exod 15) (Fretheim, 2003: 253).

Writing on the subject of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, Carpenter (1997: 606) also used creation terminology. In his view, the book of Exodus is addressing the theme of God's preservation and creation of His people in Egypt. The Israelites were the people through whom God would renew His "creation community". The multiplication of the Israelites in Egypt, he argued, was not an environmental or biological issue at all; it was essentially a theological issue in which the LORD involved Himself. He further said that the multiplication was a result of God's original blessing at creation and that the exodus event demonstrated that YHWH cared and acted for His people.

The 'creation' of Israel by God needs to be interpreted in the light of the creation of the first human beings. When God created the first human beings, he provided for them a place where to live. He did not abandon them to wander about in the universe without a place they could call their own. This concept was beautifully captured by Westermann (1978: 95) when he said: "The creature existence of human life means human life in all its relationships in existence; the person which is merely made (Gen 2:7) is not yet the creature intended by God. The creation of humanity includes the living space (the garden), the means of life (the fruits of the garden), the occupation or work (cultivate and preserve), and the community (man and

woman), and as a medium of community, language”. The point emerging from this argument is that just as God provided for the first humans when He created them, He did the same when He ‘created’ Israel. He provided her with land which constituted for Israel her own ‘Garden’ to be cultivated and preserved. In other words the gift of the land of Canaan automatically implied that Israel was responsible for caring for that land and each family which inherited land was supposed to act as responsible stewards over their portion of land. Hence, the theology of God’s creatorship enhanced man’s sense of obligation toward maintenance not only of land but also of human relationships.

The Sabbath year, like its sister institution the weekly Sabbath, provided human beings with time to worship and praise God for creating them, redeeming them and providing them with a heritage of land.

From an ethical point of view, this means that human beings need to acknowledge the fact that God is the Creator. To own land and to eat of its fruits should not be viewed as the achievement of human scheming. Human beings should acknowledge that they are creatures and that their land is in their hands because of the Creator’s plan. The implication of this mode of perception with regards to the Sabbath year is that the Sabbath year by necessity needed to reinforce the concept that land belongs to God and that it is God’s will that everyone of His children, created in the image of God should own land they call their own and develop it. The Sabbath year was therefore a call to human beings to share land with consideration for all of God’s children.

In the views of Fretheim (2003) and Carpenter (1997), the book of Exodus, especially the section that deals with Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, is the story of God in His work of creation. The exodus event is not just an ordinary military event; it is a work of creation by the Creator God who was bringing into existence a people who beforehand were not a people.

#### **3.2.4.2 Israel in the wilderness and God’s providence (Exodus 15:22-18:27)**

According to Carpenter (1997: 613), the desert period was a time when the LORD showed His ability to provide for His people under the most adverse conditions. This is the time He miraculously fed Israel with manna (Exod 16:13-16). This experience taught Israel that humankind does not live on bread alone and that the LORD was their sustenance. In Childs’ view, the gift of manna was a gracious sign of God’s care which sustained a rebellious murmuring people and sought to point them to an appreciation of God’s favour (1974: 303).

A more comprehensive picture of God as Provider was presented by Durham (1987: 227) when he noted that God's provision took the form of manna, quails and the Sabbath day for reflection and strengthening of the spirit.

Implied in this experience with regards to the Sabbath year is the fact that the Sabbath year, being a special time of reflecting on the LORD, would help people to view God as Provider whose sustaining work is not limited by time. He is to be viewed as a God of the past, the present and the future and He ever lives forever to deliver and preserve His people. This God was portrayed as the Provider God in our second chapter discussion of the Feast of Harvest.

In the wilderness, when God provided for Israel with manna, He also instructed them on how to relate the whole experience to the Sabbath day. That experience provides some light on the Sabbath year. On the sixth day the Israelites were instructed to pick manna twice as much in quantity as they picked on other days in preparation for the Sabbath day (Exod 16). On the Sabbath day the manna so kept was found fresh and edible. On other days of the week, the manna would have gone bad if it was kept overnight. Those people who went to pick manna on the Sabbath day contrary to God's word did not find it. The Sabbath day in this sense stood as a reminder to Israel of the fact that in order to experience God's blessings one needs to take God's word seriously especially in connection with the way of both receiving and utilising the gifts of God in life. The Sabbath year similarly stood as a reminder to Israel of the fact that in order to experience God's blessings of land and life, the Israelites needed to receive them as gifts from God and use them according to how God instructed.

The instruction on receiving and using of the manna took place at the national level but the actual picking of the manna and its preparations for consumption took place at the familial level. The spiritual lessons that the experience of picking and using of manna carried impacted the family unit more directly.

### **3.2.4.3 Israel at Sinai and the ratification of the covenant (Exodus 19:1-40:38)**

According to Durham (1987: 262), the covenant at Sinai turned the descendants of Jacob into "Israel", a community of faith transcending biological descent. Israel was born into "Yahweh's people" and the community was described as God's own special treasure (*segulah*), meaning a unique and exclusive possession of YHWH. They were also constituted into a kingdom of priests (*mamleket kohanim*) pointing to the fact that Israel was tasked with the extension throughout the world of the ministry of YHWH's Presence (Durham,

1987: 263). Israel was to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation presenting God's knowledge to other nations (Fretheim, 2003: 255). Israel's priestly function defined her relation to God and her neighbours and the quality of her existence (Childs, 1974: 367).

The consensus among scholars cited is that at Sinai, Israel was constituted into a peculiar priestly nation in a special relationship with God and with a mission to disseminate the knowledge of God to the world.

The ten words were YHWH's principles for life in the covenant, given as an integral part of the Sinai theophany (Durham, 1987: 402). In Fretheim's view, the covenant at Sinai was made with God's elect people and the law was a gift to an already redeemed community (2003: 255). The Decalogue revealed God's will for Israel, spelling out what God required from a covenant people whom He had delivered without demanding commitment (Childs, 1974: 402).

The shared view here is that, apart from the Decalogue coming as God's gift to Israel after her deliverance from Egypt, it was a revelation of God's will for Israel and stated clearly what God required from His covenant people.

The God who gave the law as a gift would also give Israel land as a gift and these two gifts were related. Firstly, they came from the same source, namely God Himself. Secondly, the law would govern how the land would be distributed and used. The land would on the other hand provide human beings with their temporal needs for sustenance of life so that they could worship the LORD with joy, conducting themselves according to His law. The Sabbath year apart from being a year of covenant renewal was a time that both governed humans' use of land and pointed humanity back to the Creator of land. The Sabbath year and land hence existed in a symbiotic relationship.

The law of God was given to Israel at a national level but the inculcations of the values of this law took place at the familial level where parents taught their children the requirements of God's law. The Sabbath year law's observance took place at the individual and family levels.

The Sabbath year implied that land would be governed by divine law. Where there is wise human governance, land is distributed well for the wellbeing of all. Where there is divine wisdom, land not only benefits human beings but also brings glory to God when those people

respond to God with praise and care for each other. The Sabbath year created a platform that helped to increase human consciousness to divine guidance and wisdom.

#### **3.2.4.4 Conclusion**

The God portrayed in the Covenant Code, namely Yahweh the unique, is jealous about His name and does not want to share His glory with idols (Exod 20:22-26). He is a God who is particular and demands that He be worshipped in the way He prescribed. He instructed Israel to erect altars of earth for worship at places He Himself would choose if they were to experience his blessing (Exod: 20:22-26).

The Israelites were not supposed to emulate Canaanite practices in worship (Exod 21:22-24). The theological rationale for God demanding worship that is not shared by other gods is that as God, He wanted to rule supremely in the affairs of His people. This included the people's economic life as well.

The law of the *talion* was a protective law which prevented the strong members from abusing the weaker members of the covenant community. If God was willing to protect the wellbeing of the human body, it is easy to see Him also as keen about the economic problems of His people.

In the book of Exodus, God is portrayed as Creator because He came and 'created' Israel in Egypt by miraculous intervention. After creating them, He gave them land just like He did to Adam in the Garden of Eden whom He provided with land after creating Him. Israel hence became a steward.

The Sabbath year ought to constitute time to celebrate God's gift of land. God is also portrayed as Provider in the book of Exodus because he miraculously provided Israel with manna in the wilderness (Exod 16). This same God would provide for Israel's needs in the Sabbath year when there is no planting.

As Covenant Maker and Lawgiver, God worked to create Israel into a community in which Israel as a people acknowledged God as sovereign in all areas of life. Since the economic sphere was also included in God's sovereignty, the theological base on which it stood allowed for harmony to exist in the community with regards to property rights. This was so

because YHWH gave Israel Laws that sought to protect the property rights of individuals and families. The Sabbath year Law, along with other Laws discussed in the Book of Exodus and the Covenant Code, were Laws whose theological foundations helped land to remain within the family.

### 3.3 DEUTERONOMIC CODE

To determine the motivations for the Sabbath year in the Deuteronomic Code, I will investigate two passages: Deuteronomy 15:1-11 and Deuteronomy 15:12-18. Afterwards, I will discuss the theological trends in the Deuteronomic Code and the Book of Deuteronomy.

#### 3.3.1 Deuteronomy 15:1-11

Deuteronomy 15:1 “*At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts.*”

The Israelites were not left to guess how to deal with someone who had fallen into debt since there was a clear provision that the lender was supposed to remit debt as a necessary consequence of God’s declaration of a time for cancelling debts (Merrill, 1994: 243). Merrill (1994: 243) further noted that this happened at the end of every seven years, a period not necessarily commencing with the making of the loan but as a universally recognized year of release (Exod 23:10-11; Lev 25:2-4).

According to the *halakhah*, debts were cancelled at sunset on the last day of the seventh year (Tigay, 1996: 145). The Hebrew word ‘*shemittah*’ literally means ‘dropping, release’ from the verb *sh-m-t* and here it clearly refers to debt release (Tigay, 1996: 145). This word implies that the agricultural ‘sabbatical’ (Exod 23:10-12; Lev 25:2-6) was to be observed in the same year. This is the context in which *sh-m-t* is used in Exodus 23:10-11. Fields, vineyards and groves were to be ‘released’, that is, left uncultivated in the seventh year. Christensen (2001: 312) similarly asserted that in Jewish tradition, the remission of debts took place at sunset on the last day of the seventh year.

According to Bosman (2004: 239), Deuteronomy 15:1 starts with an apodictic injunction that clearly indicates three things:

1. What must be done – *you must cancel debts.*
2. When it must be done – *at the end of every seven years.*



### 3. Who should be doing it – *the nation of Israel*.

From insights by the four scholars, one can say that the ‘Sabbath year’ in this text is being referred to as a ‘*year of release*’. The seventh year is clearly motivated by the release of debts and the suggested release of land in the same year referenced to by Tigay (1996: 145) seems plausible considering the similar term (*shemittah*) used in referring to the release of debts as well as of land.

Deuteronomy 15:2: “*This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD’s time for cancelling debts has been proclaimed.*”

Creditors were supposed to remit debts when the time of release was declared (Merrill, 1994: 243). Tigay (1996: 145) argued that “since remission was meant to benefit the poor, it did not necessarily cover all types of debts. It did not cancel unpaid wages, bills owed to shopkeepers and other types of loans. When a new king assumed office in Mesopotamia, he issued decrees to release debts of affected groups of his population. Here it is God, Israel’s divine King, who established the remission. The person to whom the creditor owed release was actually a brother and a compatriot (Christensen, 2001: 312). Bosman (2004: 239) accurately noted that this is the first reference to the special obligation to the “*brother*” and that this expression is repeated no less than seven times in this chapter. He further argues that this term was not being used as a gender inclusive term but as a term designating Israelites as opposed to foreigners. Foreigners were not supposed to benefit from the debt release scheme.

The general thrust here is that the seventh year was a year of debt release for fellow Israelites. The one who made the initiative of debt release was God, the divine King of Israel.

Deuteronomy 15:3: “*You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel debt your brother owes you.*”

This generous policy was only applicable to fellow Israelites while the foreigner was excluded because he was not the recipient of God’s special grace of election and covenant (Merrill, 1994: 244).

Following are some compelling reasons why the debt release provisions did not apply to foreigners:

1. Forgiving debts is an extraordinary sacrifice.
2. Collecting debts is a legitimate right that members of a society are willing to forgo on behalf of those close to them like family members.
3. Remission of debts aims to re-establish economic equilibrium within a society.
4. Foreigners were normally present in the country for purposes of trade.
5. Goods given to foreigners were not usually in the form of loans but investments or advance payments for goods (Tigay, 1996: 147).

The remission of debts did not apply to debts of foreigners who were to be distinguished from aliens or sojourners (Christensen, 2001: 312).

The agreed facts on Leviticus 25:3 are that debt release provisions did not cover foreigners but only Israelites, members of the Covenant community.

Deuteronomy 15:4 *“However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance he will richly bless you.”*

The best understanding of this verse is to hear the author say that matters of borrowing and lending due to poverty ought not to exist in the rich land the LORD will give you (Merrill, 1994: 244). This idea stands over against the concept which says: “There would absolutely be no poor person among the Israelites.” In other words, Merrill (1994: 244) is suggesting that for the poor not to exist in Israel, certain conditions needed to be fulfilled.

On this text, Tigay (1996: 146) noted: “Since verses 1-3 imply the presence of poverty, verses 4-6 counter with the assurance that there need be no poverty. If Israel will obey God’s laws, the present law will be unnecessary”. He similarly saw the conditional nature of the ‘existence of no poor’ statement in Israel. This statement, saying that there should be no poor in the land, pointed to an ideal goal (Christensen, 2001: 313). Verse four’s contents constitute a conditional statement. Only when certain conditions had been met would there be no poor people in the land.

There is unanimity among the three scholars (Merrill, 1994; Tigay, 1996 and Christensen, 2001) that the statement saying there would be no poor in the land was a conditional statement. Such a state would only occur if Israel fulfilled certain conditions.

Deuteronomy 15:5 *“If only you fully obeyed the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.”*

Full compliance with covenant requirements was the precondition of Israel’s prosperity in the land (Merrill, 1994: 244). Tigay (1996: 146) also stated that obedience to God’s laws was the only way to eradicate poverty in the land and Christensen (2001: 313) similarly said that obedience to God’s laws meant prosperity for Israel.

To summarise, whereas Deuteronomy 15:4 articulated the ideal Israel, Deuteronomy 15:5 mentions the necessary condition to achieve that ideal as being obedience to God’s laws. Bosman (2004: 240) argued that Deuteronomy 15:4-6 consists of promises for the future entailing economic prosperity within the Israelite community and economic prosperity over other nations due to God’s blessings.

Deuteronomy 15:6 *“For the LORD your God will bless you as He has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you.”*

If the conditions of obedience were met by Israel, Israel itself would have been blessed as a nation and turned into a channel of blessing to other nations (Merrill, 1994: 244). She would economically dominate other nations (Tigay, 1996: 146). She would actually become so prosperous that many nations would turn to her for loans (Christensen, 2001: 313).

These observations point to the truth that Israel’s prosperity depended on her spiritual standing with God which was to be demonstrated by her obedience to God.

Deuteronomy 15:7 *“If there is a poor man among your brothers in one of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tight-fisted towards your brother.”*

The attitude toward the poor was supposed to be one of softness of heart and openness of hand (Merrill, 1994: 244). Tigay (1996: 147) viewed this verse as revealing that the ideal of verse four had not been achieved, implying that a law was needed to deal with the problems of the poor. Anticipating reluctance to lend to the poor immediately before the year of remission, Moses commanded the people not to harden their hearts toward the poor (Christensen, 2001: 313).

This text encourages people to be generous to the poor even in the period towards the year of release.

Deuteronomy 15:8 *“Rather be open hearted and freely lend him whatever he needs.”*

This verse carries the meaning that true charity consists of compassion at work (Merrill, 1994: 244). People with means are called upon to open, not close their hands to meet the needs of the less fortunate (Christensen, 2001: 313). The text encourages generosity, especially to those of one’s faith community.

Deuteronomy (15:9) *“Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought: The seventh year, the seventh year for cancelling debts is near, so that you do not show ill will towards your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin.”*

The real test of commitment to this principle would be a brother who came just before the time of cancellation of debt and to give a loan to such a person would be like giving him a gift since it was evident he would not have adequate time to accumulate funds in time to pay back what he had borrowed (Merrill, 1994: 244). Even in situations like that, a kingdom citizen was supposed to extend a hand of generosity. Denying the needy person help displeased God himself. According to Tigay (1996: 146-7), a complication was foreseen by Moses that even those who are normally willing to lend would be reluctant to do so as the year of remission approached since they feared to lose whatever they loaned out this time and so he urged people to disregard such calculations. God would still bless them if they gave to the poor at this time and God would punish those who refused to lend.

This verse discouraged lenders from being hostile toward their brothers as the seventh year drew close (Christensen, 2001: 313). People were encouraged to give loans even at a time when prospects of getting back one’s money were doubtful.

Deuteronomy 15:10 *“Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart, then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything.”*

Those who could give were supposed to give freely not grudgingly, since this is what the LORD delights in (Merrill, 1994: 245). The closer the year of remission, the more likely it is that the loan would end up as a gift, but any loss incurred would be more than made up by

God (Tigay, 1996: 146). Christensen (2001: 313) said what the people with means needed to do was to give ungrudgingly with a free heart.

The scholars cited all agree that people needed to practise generous giving even at a time when the year of debt release was close.

Deuteronomy 15:11 *“There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brother and towards the poor and needy in your land.”*

On this text, Merrill (1994: 245) remarked that in the world of fallen humanity, there would always be poor people, but there must always among God’s people be a spirit of generosity to help them. The realism of this verse contrasts with the ideal described in verse 4 and since Israel would fail God by breaking his laws, poverty would persist in Israel (Tigay, 1996: 147). Should the ideal that God looks for not be found among the people, the inevitable consequence is that the poor will always be there in the land and that this fact pointed to the necessity for people who are generous to meet the needs of the poor (Christensen, 2001: 313).

It is true that we live in a world of fallen humanity which falls far short of reaching God’s ideals. Hence, there is a need for a spirit of generosity among God’s people to meet the needs of the poor.

In this section, the Sabbath year is referred to as the year of remission of debts. The motivation of the text is debt release for affected members of the Covenant community.

The question of the relationship between the Sabbath year and the year of remission of debts is a difficult one to determine. The question is whether these two ‘Sabbath year’ periods refer to one and the same thing or were they just similar events in the Israelite economy? To be more specific, was the Sabbath year (Lev 25:1-8) the same as thing as the Year of cancelling of debts (Deut 15:1-11)? In my view, two possibilities can be considered. The first possibility which to me is less convincing, is that these two ‘years’ were different and came at different periods. Their similarity only lay in that each one of them took place after seven years. This then would suggest that in Israel there were three kinds of Sabbath years. The one kind of Sabbath year was for the release of slaves, and the other would be for debt release and the last one would be the Sabbath year for the land to rest.

The seventh year for the release of slaves does not pose a problem because the exact time when one begins to count the period leading to the seventh year of release is clearly given. This was determined by the time a Hebrew servant got indentured. After serving for six years, the indentured servant was deemed to have served his full term and would be due for release in the seventh year.

To me, the second and most probable view concerning the relationship between the Sabbath year and the year for cancelling debts is that the cancelling of debts occurred as suggested by Tigay (1996: 148) on the last day of the Sabbath year.

Deuteronomy 14:22-29, which precedes the chapter on the year of remission of debts, is a section dwelling largely on tithing. Returning a tithe pointed to the fact that one acknowledged his/her indebtedness to fulfil obligations to God. Tithing entails a principle of giving which prepared people to release debts of their faith community which was in a sense an act of giving. Both tithing and the releasing of debts pose a test to people. They are practices that measure one's sincerity of faith, compassion and love. They test whether our sense of obligation to God and our fellow humans is real. Deuteronomy 15:12-18 which forms part of the literary context following the year of remission passage will be dealt with in detail in the next section.

### **3.3.2 Deuteronomy 15:12-18**

Deuteronomy 15:12 *"If a fellow Hebrew, a man or woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free."*

Extreme cases of poverty sometimes resulted in voluntary servitude in which a person would come under the care of a benefactor who would provide for all the needs of the destitute individual until he had paid off his obligations or served for a six year period (Merrill, 1994: 244). After this period, he was to be released from economic bondage so that he could once again be free and independent. Tigay (1996: 147) brought all the contents of Deuteronomy 15:12-18 under the subheading '*Manumission of indentured servants*' suggesting the release of servants who were in contractual bondage. He argued that the term *Hebrew* used here clearly referred to a fellow Israelite and not to a nomadic class of people. He further says that the law in Deuteronomy's position on women slaves did not contradict the law on female servants in Exodus 21. These laws referred to different cases. Exodus refers to a minor sold conditionally by her father for the purpose of marriage and Deuteronomy on the other hand

may refer to a girl or woman who becomes indentured because of insolvency or debt - her own, her husband or her father with no intention of marriage (Tigay, 1996: 148). It is possible that the manumission law of Exodus 21:2-6 regarding male bondsmen also applied to indentured women as in Deuteronomy. Six years was the standard period of indenture (Tigay, 1996: 148). The servant was to go free in the seventh year.

Christensen (2001: 315) places the material in Deuteronomy 15:12-18 under the subheading “*Manumission of indentured servants in the seventh year*”. He said that the expression ‘your brother’ used in this text referred to Hebrew kinsfolk, both male and female. He refers to the entire slave release law as *manumission law*. He further argued that the term ‘*Hebrew*’ has no link with the term ‘*apiru*’ which referred to people who indentured themselves for food. The term *Hebrew* is used here to emphasise the point that this law was made for Israelites, not foreigners. The law places a limitation of a time period of six years in which one Israelite would control another. The term *shemittah* appears primarily in the context of manumission of slaves who were restored to their former status of freedom in the seventh year.

In this discussion the ‘Sabbath year’ is called a *year of manumission*. The motivation of the text is the releasing of Hebrew slaves. The cited scholars agree that the term ‘*Hebrew*’ here means the same thing as Israelite and that in the seventh year these were eligible for release.

Deuteronomy 15:13 “*And when you release him, do not send him away empty handed.*”

The released slave was to be provided with supplies that would make it possible for him to begin again (Merrill, 1992: 246). The freed servant was to be given capital and supplies to live on as he/she resumed independent life (Tigay, 1996: 148). This exercise prevented the released slave to begin in poverty faced with a real threat of sliding back into servitude again. Christensen (2001: 375) said that the reason why the servant was not sent away empty handed was to ensure that the person did not have to borrow for basic sustenance.

Deuteronomy 15:14 “*Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you.*”

The gifts listed above were merely examples of possible gifts because there was still room for other items to be given (Tigay, 1996: 149). The instruction on the landowner to give the released servant as he had been blessed by the LORD meant that the master was to give as he could afford. Christensen (2001: 320), like Tigay (1996: 149) said that this statement meant

that the master was to give as much as he could afford. Tigay (1996: 149) went on to state that in subsequent Jewish traditions a minimum of thirty shekels was set as a standard gift for a released slave.

Tigay (1996: 149) and Christensen (2001: 320) agreed that the slave was to be given commencement capital by the master at the time of manumission from indentureship.

Deuteronomy 15:15 *“remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you his command today”*

The important question that needed to be seriously considered was: “If this mighty act of redemption was carried out by the Lord on Israel’s behalf, how much more should the beneficiaries of that goodness be quick to exercise it on behalf of their financially oppressed brothers and sisters?” (Merrill, 1994: 246). Tigay (1996: 149) says that the reason behind the citing of Israel’s deliverance is that her redemption from Egypt was a good reason why Israel was to extend goodness to others. Secondly the redemption from Egypt gave God authority to instruct Israel to act redemptively towards the needy. Christensen (2001: 320) said that Moses reminded the Israelites of their own experience so that they could treat their own servants with respect.

The three scholars cited are in agreement that the citing of Israel’s experience of redemption from Egypt was meant to teach Israel to treat those in need with love and a redemptive spirit.

Deuteronomy 15:16 *“But if your servant says to you ‘I do not want to leave you,’ because he loves you and your family and is well off with you.”*

A number of reasons have been presented why a person in servitude would be happy to remain a servant:

1. The bond of affection which developed between the debtor and his master.
2. The servant’s greatly improved standard of living under the master (Merrill, 1996: 246).
3. The reason some servants chose to remain in servitude was because they felt a sense of security with their master (Tigay, 1996: 147).



4. The choice of becoming a permanent slave possibly arose out of weighing up by the indentured servant of his present status as compared to the risks and responsibilities that accompany freedom (Christensen, 2001: 321).
5. To remain a slave after the period of indentureship was a decision made by the slave not imposed on him by the master. Otherwise, after six years of serving each slave was supposed to go free.

Deuteronomy 15:17 <i>“then take an awl and push it through his ear lobe into the door, and he will become your servant for life. Do the same for your maidservant.”</i>
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This text represents a formalization of the relationship and also the legal procedure that followed when a slave declared that he had chosen to be a slave under his master for life and this process consisted of the piercing of the ear of the individual with an awl pressed against the door (Merrill, 1994: 246). The door was the door of the master and the act spoke of the identification of the servant with his or her lord's life. Tigay (1996: 150) points to a number of possibilities with regard to the significance of the ceremony of piercing a servant's ear by his master. The first view which Tigay (1996: 150) forwarded is that piercing the ear symbolized the servant's obligation to have his or her ear always open to hear the master's orders. A second view posited by Tigay (1996: 150) states that the pierced ear was a slave mark or that it was used to hold an object that served as a slave mark. The third view which Tigay (1996) advocated says that the additional reason in Deuteronomy suggests that the exercise symbolized the servant became permanently attached to the master's house. According to Tigay (1996: 150), later Jewish exegetes said that the act was punitive. The ear which at Sinai had heard God issuing freedom was being punished now for choosing servitude ahead of freedom.

The piercing of the ear seems to symbolize the willingness of the servant to listen to his master and it also seems to symbolize permanent servitude. Tigay (1996: 150) says the door used in piercing the servant's ear was the one at the master's home. When the ceremony was conducted the slave would become a slave to his master until the master's death unless a Jubilee year came first.

What is clear in the remarks of these scholars is that permanent indentureship was marked by an important legal ceremony which according to the Covenant Code (Exod 21:2-6) was also religious.

Deuteronomy 15:18 which is the last text for close reading says: *“Do not consider it a hardship to set your servant free, because his service to you these six years has been worth twice as much as that of a hired hand. And the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do.”*

After six years had passed, a servant had to be willingly granted his freedom and the benefactor had no basis for complaining since he had received the compensation of six years of labour (Merrill, 1994: 470). The service given by an indentured slave was considered twice as good as that of a hireling since the life of the indentured person was involved. Divine blessings followed compliance to this law of release. Tigay (1996: 150) accurately noted that Deuteronomy is not only interested in compliance with the law but in the individual's feeling whilst carrying it out. The master's temptation was to feel that the law of release constituted an unreasonable hardship. What the text reminds him is that he had profited from the servant and hence had no reason to feel that he was being deprived. The servant had given twice the service of hired man. The text further assures that any loss incurred by the master in the course of releasing a servant would be more than made up by God. According to Christensen (2001: 321) the master was not supposed to begrudge the action required in freeing a servant. The law spoke to the master's feelings as well as his need to comply with the law. The services a master received from the servant gave him more profit than services from a hired worker.

Deuteronomy 15:12-18, as viewed by scholars cited, is a text motivated by the release of Hebrew slaves.

A proper Sabbath year observance (Lev 25:1-7) needed to adopt the attitudes mentioned in connection with the years of remitting debts and of releasing of slaves. In these years there was a spirit of solidarity among the Israelites so that the impoverished Hebrew servant was still to be considered a 'brother' (Deut 15:1-18). By implication the Sabbath year was meant to affirm the brotherhood of every Israelite person under the Divine umbrella of God's fatherhood.

The claim of brotherhood was not just to be an empty rhetoric void of basic fundamentals that make for concrete relationships. The recognition of brotherhood expressed itself in concrete positive steps to address the plight of poorer brothers within the bigger family of Israel. In the

year of slave release the ‘master’ gave to the released slave liberally as the LORD had prospered him. The Sabbath year was meant to be a challenge for every Israelite not only to think but also to extend liberality towards the needy brothers within the covenant community.

The motivation for giving liberally in the year of releasing of slaves was the memory of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. The Sabbath year similarly was to serve as a reminder to the Israelites that the liberality expected of them in this year was linked to the appreciation of what God had done for them individually and collectively in the past - the deliverance from Egypt. Creditors were instructed to give to their debtors generously without a grudging heart (Deut 15:10). During the year of releasing slaves, the ‘master’ was encouraged to observe this law without ill feelings (Deut 15:18). By implication the Sabbath year was not meant to be observed with a grudging heart but it was an experience meant to be engaged in with the right emotional and spiritual state of the mind. Such observance of the Sabbath year would be accompanied by God’s blessings.

### **3.3.3 Theological trends in the Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 12-26)**

In this section I will investigate the theological trends within the Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 12-26). According to Schmidt (1979: 121-122), the Deuteronomic Code material is structured as follows:

- I. Commandments on unity and purity of cult (Deuteronomy 12-16)
- II. Decrees about persons in office (Deuteronomy 16:18-18)
- III. Commands on various subjects (Deuteronomy 19-25)
- IV. Liturgical appendix (Deuteronomy 26)

In this structure, the Sabbath year legislation falls within the first subsection to do with unity and purity of cult.

According to Merrill (1994: 217) the Deuteronomic Code is structured as follows:

- I. The Exclusiveness of the LORD and His worship (Deuteronomy 12-15).
- II Kingdom officials (Deuteronomy 16:18-18:22)
- III. Civil Law (Deuteronomy 19:1-22:8)

IV. Laws of purity (Deuteronomy 22:9-23:18)

V. Laws of interpersonal relationships (Deuteronomy 23:19-25:19)

VI. Laws of covenant celebration and confirmation (Deuteronomy 26:1-15)

In this structure, the Sabbath year falls within the first section which deals with the exclusiveness of the LORD and His worship (Deut 12:1-16:17).

Of the two structures, I choose to work with the more concise structure proposed by Schmidt (1979: 121-122) with slight modifications.

My working structure is as follows:

3.3.3.1 Commandments on unity and purity of cult (Deuteronomy 12-14)

3.3.3.1.1 Centralization of worship (Deuteronomy 12-13)

3.3.3.1.2 Tithing (Deut 14:22-29)

3.3.3.2 Decrees about persons in office (Deuteronomy 16:18-18:18)

3.3.3.3 Commandments on various subjects (Deuteronomy 19-25)

3.3.3.4 God as Provider (Deuteronomy 26)

The investigation concerning the theological trends in the Deuteronomistic Code will focus more on the section dealing with the commandments on purity of the cult since this is the section where the Sabbath Law is found.

### **3.3.3.1 Commandments concerning unity and purity of the cult (Deuteronomy 12-16:17)**

In this subsection, I will focus on the theme of centralization of the cult (Deut 12:1-14) and the theme of tithing (Deut 14:22-29).

#### **3.3.3.1.1 Centralization of worship (Deuteronomy 12-13)**

Deuteronomy 12:4 -6 *“You must not worship the LORD your God in their way. But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all the tribes to put His Name there for His dwelling. To that place you must go; there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your free offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.”*

I have chosen to examine this text because it speaks directly to the subject of the centralization of worship which has the ring of great significance for Israel’s life in the land of Canaan.

The theme of the centralization of the cult as a great theme in the book of Deuteronomy was stated concisely by Schmidt (1979: 129) when he stated that the intention of Deuteronomy could be summed up in a three member formula: one God, one people and one cult.

According to Merrill (1994: 221), after Moses had commanded the removal of idols and their places of worship, he then turned to the matter of where and how God was to be worshipped. In his view, that place had to be totally different from pagan shrines. Wenham (2003: 134) also noted that the necessity to choose one place of worship was motivated by the fear of religious disloyalty the worst expression of which would be found in joining in Canaanite worship. Miller (1990: 131) claimed that Deuteronomy 12-14 is a section carrying the basic instruction of the Book of Deuteronomy: total allegiance to “the LORD your God.” He went further to note that this text is a radical claim for the lordship of the God of Israel and a total rejection of the claim of any other deity to Israel’s worship. The total rejection is found in the opening verses (Deut 12:2-3) where total obliteration of every dimension of the other gods is called for.

Merrill (1994: 219-220) based his remarks concerning the theological rationale for centralization of worship on Deuteronomy 12:2, a text that carries the instruction for the Israelites to destroy all Canaanite shrines. In his view, it would have been impossible for the LORD alone to be worshipped in Canaan as long as there were pagan centres of worship. The idols, he contended, had to be destroyed first to allow for a central place of worship.

The centralization of worship, as discussed above, had as its major goal the exclusive worship of YHWH in the way He prescribed.

In the perception of many scholars, the idea of centralized worship was linked to the worship of One God and the exclusion of all other gods.

Commenting on the implications of sacrificing in different places, Christensen (2001: 242) rightly noted that such a practice would be tantamount to false worship. Tigay (1996: 120) concur that in choosing a central place of worship, God by that decision limited all sacrificial worship to that place.

According to Schmidt (1979: 129) the chosen place is the place that belonged to Yahweh and where He was present. Merrill (1994: 221), commenting on God taking residence at the place He would choose, said this was in line with the idea inherent in Suzerain-vassal treaties and relationships that the great king resided in a palace in a central city to which the client princes and peoples must come to pay tribute and bring other symbols of submission. As the Great King, alluded to by Merrill (1994:221), God wanted Israel to pay Him loyalty and homage by keeping His Laws if she was to enjoy His protection in the land. Proper Sabbath year observance therefore focussed attention on Yahweh alone as God and going on to do things that glorified His name in that year. That is what assured Israel of her place in the land.

To relate the theme of centralization of worship to the Sabbath year and retention of land within the family, it can be pointed out that the centralization of worship pointed to the theological reality that there is one God who was to be worshipped in the way He prescribed.

#### **3.3.3.1.2 Tithing (Deut. 14:22-29)**

I have chosen to discuss the tithing Law because it is the text in the immediate context of the Sabbath year Law in Deuteronomy 15 and it is also a humanitarian Law like the Sabbath year Law.

According to Wilson (1992: 579), people along with their family members and the Levites, were supposed to consume the tithes of grain, wine and oil at the place chosen by God. He went further to state that in every third year the tithes were to be kept in the town of one's residence and shared with the Levites and the poor. Gossai (2000: 1315) said that tithes in the Deuteronomic Code included a social component, namely care for the poor within society.

Wenham (2003: 135) said that the third year tithes constituted one of Deuteronomy's humanitarian features. He also noted that Deuteronomy 15, the chapter juxtaposed to the law

on tithing (Deut 14:22-29) is also made up of material to do with the relief of the poor. I agree with him that Deuteronomy 15: 1-18 is made up of material to do with humanitarian concerns, the Sabbath year laws of debt remission and slave release. The tithe laws and the Sabbath year Laws are not just adjacent laws in Deuteronomic Code, they are also laws sharing the same humanitarian theme as Wenham (2003: 135) accurately pointed out.

Yet, another compelling argument for the thematic link between the Sabbath year laws has been presented by Merrill (1994: 239). Merrill (1994: 239) posits that tithes, Sabbath year laws and animal offerings and annual feasts which are covered in Deuteronomy 14:22-17:17 constituted Suzerain-vassal relationships that is called 'tribute to the Sovereign'. He argued that this entire section addresses the matter of the procedure for presenting tribute (Deut 14:22-29); the use of tithes in regard to other Israelites (Deut 1-11) and indentured slaves (Deut 15:12-18); special instruction concerning animal offerings (Deut 15:19-23) and three major festival times when tribute was to be taken to the LORD at the central sanctuary (Deut 16:1-17).

Christensen (2001: 308) argued that Deuteronomy 14:22-15:23 constituted a literary section united under one theme, alleviating the suffering of the poor. In his literary analysis the exhortation to lend to the poor (Deut 15:7-11) is the structural centre of the following five part concentric structural design:

A. The annual triennial tithes (Deut 14:22-29)

B. The remission of debts every seven years (Deut 15:1-6)

X. Exhortation to lend to the poor (Deut 15:7-11)

Bi. Manumission of indentured servants in the seventh year (Deut 15:12-18)

Ai. Sacrifice of firstborn livestock (Deut 15:19-23)

To me, the structure presented by Christensen (2001: 308) suggests that lending to the poor (X) is the central theme of Deuteronomy 14:22-15:23. The main activities related to caring for the poor according to the structure (B and Bi) are the remission of debts in every seven years and the manumission of indentured servants in the seventh year. The outer brackets (A and Ai) represent the secondary means of taking care of the poor. This is where triennial tithes and the sacrifices of the first born of livestock fell.

The arguments presented on the relationship that exists between tithing and the Sabbath year from a Suzerain-vassal relationship model by Merrill (1994: 239) and the literary analysis approach by Christensen (2001: 239) both yield one result, namely that these two institutions belong to the same family. In my view, based on the insights from different scholars, I see tithing in the Deuteronomic Code as carrying a humanitarian function just like the Sabbath year. In the Deuteronomic Code, tithing was meant to take care of the individual worshipper, his family and the Levites at the central sanctuary. Every third year the tithe was consumed in the local town with the Levites and the poor.

I see the tithing system and the Sabbath year humanitarian laws as all pointing to a God of compassion and liberality with whom liberality was the answer to the needs of humanity. To me He is a God who called on Israel to exercise practical godliness which, in my view, alone would set up an environment where issues of land ownership could be viewed as privileges of responsible stewardship and not as objects used to gain personal, economic and political mileage.

### **3.3.3.2 Decrees about persons in office (Deuteronomy 16:18-18:18)**

In this subsection, I will consider the theme of kingship (Deut 17:14-20) because in my view, the king in Israel is a person who wielded great influence in matters of political, economic and even religious governance of the land. Because of the nature of his work, I think the king's influence on issues of land ownership either by the nation as a whole or by individual families and the observance of the Sabbath year was very significant.

The Israelites were permitted to appoint a king on certain important conditions (McConville, 2003: 187). Ryken and Wilhoit (1998: 477) described those conditions as hard criteria.

McConville (2003: 187) listed the conditions required of a king as being a brother Israelite; desisting from the temptation to become powerful by amassing a cavalry or by entering into alliance with Egypt, keeping a copy of the Law and being a student of the Law. Ryken and Wilhoit (1998: 477) came up with an even longer list of conditions reflecting the full contents of Deuteronomy 17:14-20. Their list of conditions set for a king included that the king was supposed to be chosen by God; he was not to be a foreigner; he was not to accumulate horses; he was not to accumulate many wives because this would set his heart aside; he was not to accumulate wealth for himself; he was to write a copy of the Law for himself; he was to read that Law and obey it.



According to Wenham (2003: 136), the Israelite king was supposed to be different from the typical oriental king. The Israelite king, Wenham (2003: 136) noted, was to be a student of the Law. Ryken and Wilhoit (1998: 477) noted that the king was not to set a law unto himself, but rather was subject to God's Law and his major function was to be an example of a humble servant of Yahweh. The observation of Wenham (2000: 136) was that the king described in the Deuteronomic Code sounds more like a priest or prophet than a secular ruler. The king was supposed to be a model Israelite (Miller 2000: 545).

I see that the conditions laid down for the king in Israel as pointing to the reality that the King was supposed to concentrate more on the development of his personal character than on increasing his might. To my mind, the portrayed king is one who acknowledged the kingship of God over him. Of the conditions noted by the scholars cited, the one that I think impinge directly on the maintenance of land within the family is the one that said that the king was not supposed to amass wealth. I take this position because among the options that a king could use to get rich quickly was heavy taxation of his subjects or forcible acquisition of land from his subjects.

If the king on the other hand saw himself as a servant of God, he would naturally respect the property of his subjects and even protect the property of vulnerable members of the covenant community. He would thus act as a champion of the economic and land rights of the people.

The Sabbath year to the king in Israel, as I see it, meant a spiritual challenge because this year had its demands on the king that maybe exceeded the demands on everyone else because of the nature of his work. If the King sought to meet the ideals set for him in the Deuteronomic Code with regards to the Sabbath year, he then had the following major challenges: to read the Law so as to refresh his mind on what God required him to do in the Sabbath year; to find out how he would implement the Law in his own life; and finally to find out how he could use his influence to ensure that the Sabbath year was observed in his entire kingdom.

I think if a king had the Law of God guiding him, he would be exemplary in observing the Sabbath year and by his example he would encourage many Israelites to keep the Sabbath year in the right way. In addition to this, the king might use other means at his disposal to ensure the Sabbath year was observed in his kingdom. The options he had, included personal teaching of the Law to members of his nobility and encouraging priests and elders of the people to take the 'teaching' of the Law to the people all over his kingdom.

### **3.3.3.3 Commands on various subjects (Deuteronomy 19-25)**

In this subsection, I will discuss the theme: ‘Cities of asylum’ (Deut 19:1-13).

My reason for choosing this text is to see how far this law went in seeking to protect people who were faced with problems of a nature not of their own making. I will then apply it to matters of the Sabbath year and land.

Moses instructed the people to select three cities as places of refuge to which a person accused of manslaughter could flee for protection (Merrill, 1994: 276). Wenham (2003: 136) said that homicide is outright murder and it is one of the most polluting of sins and defiles the land, so if it is not treated properly, it would make it impossible to remain in the land. He went further to state that in Israel there were no police to maintain law and order and if someone was killed, it was the duty of his nearest male relative to catch and execute the killer. Deuteronomy’s concern in providing cities of refuge was that a manslayer who accidentally killed someone might have a chance to escape without execution (Christensen, 2001: 130). Wenham (2003: 136) accurately noted that the provision of cities of refuge had to do with minimizing the loss of innocent blood in the land. The individual who fled to the city of refuge had the privilege of appearing for trial before the city’s tribunal and present his case and if found innocent he was acquitted (Merrill, 1994: 277).

I see the law of cities of asylum as pointing to the theological reality that God is Protector. He is a God who sought to protect the lives of people who had accidentally killed someone. In connection with land belonging to families, I see the protective aspect of God extending itself into seeking to protect the economic well-being of the most vulnerable members of the covenant community.

I see some dimensions of the city of asylum that could link its functions well with the Sabbath year. As long as the manslayer’s life was outside the gates of the city of asylum, his life was under threat from the avenger of blood. The sense of assurance and security came only when he arrived at the city of asylum. The Sabbath year like the city of asylum assured freedom to those slaves who entered into its temporal gates. The Sabbath year assured remission of debts to those debtors who entered its temporal gates as well. The Sabbath year needed to act as a line of demarcation between a life under threat from destructive forces and a life of security and freedom, a life under the bondage of sin and a life liberated from the clutches of iniquity.

On the other hand, the Sabbath year was not an automatic remedy to men's problems, just as the city of asylum was not an automatic solution to manslaughter. It is only those manslaughterers who decided to make the city of asylum their source of protection that got the needed help. The Sabbath year similarly did no good to those ('masters' and slaves, creditors and debtors) who chose to ignore its provisions. It is only as 'masters' and servants, and creditors and debtors obeyed the Sabbath year law as God's clarion call for the emancipation of slaves and the remission of debts, that the Sabbath year served indeed as the true charter to freedom for slaves and the enduring ground of hope to debtors.

The Sabbath year, by demanding that debts be remitted and slaves be released, functioned as one of the means God used to protect the economic wellbeing of the poor.

### 3.3 3.4 God as Provider (Deuteronomy 26)

My reason for choosing Deuteronomy 26:1-11 is that this text discusses the religious significance of land and agricultural matters which are integral elements to a better understanding of the Sabbath year and its relationship to the retention of land within the family.

Deuteronomy 26:1-4 *When you have entered the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, take some of the first fruit of all that you have produced from the soil and the land the Lord is giving you and put them in a basket and say to the priest in office at that time: "I declare to you today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our fathers to give us."*

Concerning the significance of this ceremony, Tigay (1996: 237-238) said that the farmer in this passage was thanking God primarily for His guidance of Israel's history from its humble beginnings - freeing them from oppression and giving them the land. Merrill (1994: 334) concurs with this point of view. Christensen (2002: 636) said that the offering of the first fruits of the soil was an acknowledgement that God is the source and owner of the land's produce. According to Merrill (1994: 334), the peace and stability that permitted the inauguration of regular agricultural patterns in the land would be irrefutable evidence that the Lord God had indeed fulfilled His promises to the fathers. He went further to assert that in view of this and the saving grace of YHWH, the farmer would come to offer the First Fruits of the fields. According to Tigay (1996: 241) all other verses in Deuteronomy that require sharing the feast with the poor include the orphan and widow as well as the stranger and it

could hardly be otherwise. Perhaps Deuteronomy 26:1-11 singles out the stranger because it is their situation that best corresponds to the Israelites' experience in Egypt. Merrill (1994: 334) noted that if the community as a whole was true to the LORD they would be blessed by Him, and even the poorest elements of Israel's society would benefit.

According to the evidence presented here, the ceremony of First Fruits ended in a feasting ceremony that included the poor members of Israel's society and hence carried a humanitarian dimension.

The ceremony of the First Fruits possessed two prominent views of God, namely God as the Redeemer and God as Provider. God as Redeemer is depicted in the recitation (Deut 26:1-11) as the one who came and rescued Israel from Egyptian bondage. He is a God who demands that His children should move beyond meditation on the redemption of their brothers and sisters and go on to work toward their redemption. During the ceremony of the First Fruits he asked the Israelite to act redemptively toward the economically weak members of the society by sharing a meal with them. The Sabbath year, like the ceremony of the First Fruits, had its theological base in the memory of God as Redeemer.

Secondly, the Sabbath year, like the ceremony of the First Fruits, had a humanitarian concern. In the Sabbath year, as it is enshrined in the Deuteronomy Code, God demanded that Israel should act redemptively toward debtors and slaves just as she herself had experienced the redeeming grace of God (15:1-11; 12-18). Debts were to be remitted and slaves were to be released. The Redeemer God of the ceremony of First Fruits, who is the same as the God of the Sabbath year, expects His people to act as conduits of His redemption. The year of cancelling debts, the year of slave release and the ceremony of First Fruits each in its own way and scale acted as a vehicle of empowerment for the economically weak members of the covenant community. This was more so with the Sabbath year periods which had more to offer, that could redress and to a great degree restore the social and economic equilibrium of the nation. As being vehicles of economic empowerment, I see these institutions as having played a great role in helping to keep land within the family.

The ceremony of First Fruits of the land served as an acknowledgment that God is the Owner and Provider of the land. The other important insight on land portrayed in this passage, is that land must be valued highly. More than that, the relationship between Provider of land (God) and the receiver of land (humankind) and the land itself needed to be harmonised. Humans

had to value their relationship with the Provider above his relationship with the gift (land). This was to be demonstrated by a response of thankfulness to God by humans by bringing to Him the first fruits of the land.

The celebrations concerning God's gift of land as I see it, took place at two levels, namely that of the family and of the sanctuary. The person who came to the sanctuary to thank God for the harvest must have appreciated God for what He had done for him first of all in terms of his family.

I think this harmonious relationship is what helped to keep land within the family. If harmony between the Provider of land and the receiver of the land was broken, the harmony between humans and the land would automatically be jeopardized. This was so because land was given in fulfilment of the promise to the fathers by God and if God was displeased by His people, He could easily withdraw the land received by promise.

### **3.3.4 CONCLUSION**

I have identified and discussed a number of themes in the Deuteronomic Code and their implications for the Sabbath year and retention of land within the family. The theme of centralization of the cult (Deut 12:1-14) portrayed God as particular with regards to the manner He desired to be worshipped. As the Great King of Israel He required Israel to pay him homage in a prescribed way if she was going to enjoy God's protection in the land. This included observing the Sabbath year Law as well.

The theme of tithing (Deut 14:22-29) revealed that the Law of tithing in the Deuteronomic Code is a humanitarian Law mostly concerned with taking care of the needs of the poor. It is a Law that was found to be related to the Sabbath year Law which is also a humanitarian Law. It was further noted that these laws pointed to God as a God of compassion and liberality who commends practical godliness. Where there is practical godliness, it was noted that land ownership is seen as a form of stewardship, and not an object of political bickering.

In the section to do with persons in office (Deut 16-18), it was discovered that the king in Israel was supposed to be a student of the Law of God and to exemplify that law in his own life. The king was not supposed to amass wealth to himself. It was further noted that this implied that the king was not supposed to abuse his powers to either heavily tax his subjects or to forcibly acquire land from some of his subjects. I suggested that the king was actually

supposed to protect the land rights of the vulnerable members of the covenant community and that in the Sabbath year the king was supposed to lead by example in the remitting of debts owed him by his subjects and in releasing slaves. The king could use other means at his disposal to ensure the Sabbath year was observed well in his kingdom.

It was also discovered that cities of asylum (Deut 19) portrayed God as Protector of innocent people's lives. I argued that God's aspect of protection could easily extend itself to protecting the economic rights and land rights of vulnerable members of the community of God's people. Furthermore, I indicated that the Sabbath year functioned in similar ways to the cities of asylum in that it provided social and economic security to those who entered its temporal gates.

On the theme of God as Provider, it was found that God's gift of redemption, land and harvests was celebrated at the ceremony of first fruits. I discovered that the spirit of gratitude in this ceremony was to be carried into the Sabbath year and concluded that a contented thankful people will neither recklessly dispose of their gift of land nor seek to forcibly acquire more land from their poor brothers.

In the Deuteronomic Code the theological themes covered as indicated above point to the reality that the Sabbath year helped land to remain within the family.

### **3.3.5 Theological trends in the Book of Deuteronomy**

A number of structures have been suggested for the Book of Deuteronomy by different scholars. I will consider structures proposed by three of them.

Cline (1963), cited by Dillard (1994: 97) suggested the following structure for the Book of Deuteronomy based on ancient Near East treaty models:

- I. Preamble (Deuteronomy 1:1-5)
- II. Historical Prologue (Deuteronomy 1:6-3:9)
- III. Stipulations (4-26)
  - a. Basic (Deuteronomy 4:1-11:32)
  - b. Detailed (12:1-26:19)

IV. Curses and blessings, ratification (27-30)

V. Succession arrangements (31-34)

a. Witnesses

b. Provision for public reading

Wenham (2003: 125) based the structure of the Book of Deuteronomy on the Near Eastern treaty documents of the second millennium B.C. His structure, similar to the one proposed by Dillard (1994: 97) is as follows:

I. Historical prologue (Deuteronomy 1-3)

II. Treaty stipulations (Deuteronomy 4-26)

III. Document clause (Deuteronomy 27:3-31:9-13)

IV. Blessings (Deuteronomy 28:1-14)

V. Curses (Deuteronomy 28:15-68)

This structure surprisingly omitted Deuteronomy 27:1-2 and chapters 29-34.

The third and last structure which I will consider is the one suggested by Collins (2004: 160). In his view, the structure of the Book of Deuteronomy may be summarised as follows:

I. Motivational speeches including some recollections of Israel's history (Deuteronomy 1-11).

II. The Laws (Deuteronomy 12-26)

III. Curses and blessings (Deuteronomy 27-28)

IV. Concluding materials (29-34)

Of the three structures presented above, I choose to modify and work with Collins' structure (2004: 160) which is more concise and also works with the assumption that Deuteronomy 12-26 constitutes a special literary unit which ought to stand on its own. These chapters actually constitute the Laws called the Deuteronomic Code.

The following working structure is therefore suggested:

3.3.5.1 Motivation speeches including some recollections of Israel's history  
(Deuteronomy 1-11)

3.3.5.2 The Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 12-26)

3.3.5.3 Curses and blessings (Deuteronomy 27-28)

3.3.5.4 Concluding Material (Deuteronomy 29-34)

### **3.3.5.1 Motivational speeches including some recollections of Israel (Deuteronomy 1-11)**

In this section, I will consider the text of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 which addresses the all important subject of love for God. I want to determine what role the love for God could play in matters of the Sabbath year, family, and land.

The basis of the development of the theme under discussion is Deuteronomy 6:4-5 "*Hear O Israel, the LORD our God is one. Love the LORD with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.*"

The statement: "Hear O Israel the LORD our God" is one that has been interpreted by many scholars as referring to Israel's relationship to God as His people. Miller (1990: 98) for example posited that the words constituted a confession by Israel that served to shape their identity and way of life in the world. He further stated that these words pointed to Israel as God's people and that Israel's life was shaped by that awareness.

The question one may ask is one concerning the implications of Israel being God's people. According to Tigay (1996: 76), though other peoples neighbouring Israel would worship various beings and things they considered divine, Israel was supposed to recognize Yahweh alone. He continued to stress the point that what this meant was that Yahweh was to be recognized exclusively and His name alone was to be invoked in worship. Miller (1990: 99) concurred and went further to note that what the LORD was concerned with was the sole worship and not multiple manifestations of Israel's God.

According to Merrill (1994: 163), Israel would acknowledge God's exclusiveness and uniqueness by obeying Him.



The arguments presented above, point to the reality that the confession: “The LORD our God is one God” meant first and foremost that Israelites were related to God as His people and that that awareness was a call to them to recognize Yahweh alone as their God in worship and practice.

According to Merrill (1994: 164), the love commanded in Deuteronomy 6:5 is not emotive or sensual in its connotation but it is love of the nature of obligation. Tigay (1996: 76), though of the opinion that love is a feeling, nevertheless argued in favour of the fact that love could be commanded since the idea that a feeling can be commanded is not foreign to the *Torah* because the *Torah* assumes that people can cultivate proper attitudes. According to Miller (1990: 102), the love described in Deuteronomy 6:5 is responsive and reciprocal in that it is rooted in the prior love of the One who loved Israel first. Merrill (1994: 164) went further and specifically defined what God had done for Israel. He posited that because of whom and what He is with regard to His people whom He elected and redeemed, the LORD rightly demanded of them unqualified obedience. I think this theological argument by Merrill (1994: 164) is valid because at the time God was giving this ‘love’ Law to Israel He had accomplished their redemption from Egypt 40 years earlier. To love the LORD means to be loyal to the LORD, to keep the LORD’s commandments and to walk in the ways of the LORD (Miller, 1990: 102).

Love in Deuteronomy expressed itself by keeping the commandments of God.

According to Tigay (1996: 77), when Deuteronomy describes God’s love, it means love expressed in benevolent acts (Deut 10:18), like feeding strangers and widows. Israel’s love was to be patterned after God’s love which was inseparable from acts of love (Tigay, 1996: 77). Miller (1990: 102) asserted that love in Deuteronomy expressed itself in loyalty and service.

According to Merrill (1994: 164) the command to love the LORD with the whole heart, soul and strength carried the idea of loving God with all essence and expression. According to Miller (1990: 103) the idea was to express a superlative degree of commitment. Tigay (1996: 77) said that the expression describes how Israel was supposed to love God, serve Him, observe the commandments and return to Him. He concluded that since YHWH alone is Israel’s God, Israel must love Him with an undivided heart.

In the theological discussion on the love for God I discovered the following theological assertions:

- Yahweh alone was to be recognized as God.
- That recognition entailed worshipping Yahweh alone as God and keeping His commandments.
- The worshipping of other deities was outright rejected.
- The Sabbath year as an integral part of the Law of God of necessity stands as an integral part of the prominent pointers to the uniqueness and exclusiveness of Yahweh.
- The observance of this Law constituted recognition of Yahweh alone as God.

True love for God, as discussed above, expresses itself in loyalty to God. Keeping the Law of God including the Sabbath year Law signified loyalty to Him. In the same vein, the denial of God's Law and even the Sabbath year alone would signify a shift in loyalty and would mark the beginning of rebellion towards God which might lead to disastrous consequences for Israel. The Sabbath year as a sign of recognition of Yahweh alone as God stood as a reminder to Israel always to be loyal to the one God of her confession. Hence, the Sabbath year was a challenge to Israel to reject all other deities and embrace Yahweh alone as God and give Him their undivided loyalty.

Love in the Book of Deuteronomy was demonstrated in benevolent acts and in relationship to the Sabbath year, this implies that if the Sabbath year observance was to be meaningful at all, the participants needed to carry into this year true expressive love that would entail giving food to the hungry, clothing the naked and helping the needy.

In the discussion of love in Deuteronomy 6:5, it was found that love in this text is responsive love to YHWH who demanded it from Israel because He had redeemed them and because He alone was their God. This love entails loyalty to God and will express itself by keeping the commandments. More than that, this love is benevolent in character and directed to the needs of human beings.

The love for God as discussed above is not emotive love but principled love that is loyal to God and seeks to keep his commandments. I see this love as helping Israel to do everything that God required, including the observance of the Sabbath year law and all its requirements. In essence this love would play a great part in helping Israel to remain in the land since it placed God, the Giver of land, at the centre of its affections.

### **3.3.5.2 The Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 12-26)**

This section has already been discussed in section 3.3.

### **3.3.5.3 Curses and blessings (Deuteronomy 28:1-68)**

In this section I will consider the whole of chapter 28 because this chapter as a whole dwells on blessings (Deut 28:1-14) and curses (Deut 28: 15-68) which would affect the stay of Israel in the land.

Ancient treaties and law codes usually ended with a section of blessings and curses and the appearance of this feature in Deuteronomy is an indication that the Book was used in covenant renewal ceremonies (Wenham, 2003: 140). Miller (1990: 194) concurred with this position. He elaborated by stating that the blessings and curses were placed at the end of the document as sanctions to ensure that the parties to the treaty would abide by its stipulations. It is just such a function that these blessings and curses fulfil in the covenantal structure that Deuteronomy sets forth to formalize, articulate and enforce the relationship between Israel and the LORD (Miller, 1990: 194).

This chapter constitutes a detailed exposition of the consequences of Israel's obeying or disobeying the terms of the covenant that Moses has rehearsed in chapters 5-26 (see Tigay, 1996: 257). A glorious prospect of peace and prosperity awaited Israel if they faithfully obeyed the LORD their God, being careful to do all His commandments (Wenham, 2003: 140). For obedience God promises abundant crops and food, human and animal fertility, wealth, surplus, economic pre-eminence and military success (Tigay, 1996: 257 and Miller, 1990: 196). On the other hand, all manner of personal and national disasters would befall the nation if they did not keep the law (Wenham, 2003: 140). According to Tigay (1996: 257) disobedience was threatened with droughts, diseases, crop failure, economic collapse, dependency, defeat in war, conquest, oppression, famine, cannibalism and exile.

Commenting on the covenantal structure of curses and blessings Miller (1990) correctly observed: “The covenantal structure with its encouragement to obedience and sanctions against disobedience is not meant to suggest a one-to-one correspondence between a single act and a single outcome. It is meant to claim a relationship in which words and acts determine outcome and consequences.”(1990:198).

The prosperity of Israel was conditional upon her allegiance and loyalty to God. If Israel obeyed God, walking according to His laws, she would prosper but if Israel chose the course of disobedience she would be doomed, losing everything including land. Obedience to all of God’s laws including the Sabbath law and the Sabbath year law assured Israel of a place in the land. Neglect of the Sabbath year alone constituted disobedience enough to warrant divine wrath and could result in exile for Israel.

### **3.3.5 4 The reading of the Law (Deuteronomy 31:9-11)**

Deuteronomy 31:9-11 *“So Moses wrote down this Law and gave it to the priests the sons of Levi, who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD and to all the elders of Israel. Then Moses commanded them: “at the end of every seven years, in the year of cancelling of debts, during the Feast of Tabernacles when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this Law before them in their hearing...”*

Moses gave the Law to the religious and civil leaders of the people who would be responsible for guiding the nation’s affairs in accordance with the teaching and for having it read every seventh year (Tigay, 1996: 291). According to Kline, cited by Merrill (1994: 398) the priests had official custody of “this Law”, that is of the covenant text. This was in keeping with the obvious need for partners in covenant relationship to preserve copies of the document to which they initially committed themselves. This was the practice in ancient Near Eastern cultures where such arrangements are attested, so it is not surprising that both the LORD and Israel would follow suit.

The *Torah* was to be recited every seventh year at the Festival of Booths (Christensen, 2002: 765; Merrill, 1994: 399; Tigay, 1996: 291). The reading of the Law was to be part of the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles in the years of release or remission, that is, every seventh observance of that Feast (Merrill, 1994: 399). Merrill (1994: 399) argued that the year of release refers to the covenant stipulation described in Deuteronomy 15:1-3 and that the stipulation required all debts of fellow Israelites to be cancelled. He went further to state

that it was appropriate that this be done at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles because the festival commemorated the great acts of the exodus and of election responsibility.

In my view, the reading of the Law at this particular occasion theologically helped the people to redefine who they were and, contingent upon this renewal and reaffirmation of identity, the ethical imperatives they were supposed to embrace followed. The reading of the Law served the purpose of convincing people to do the right thing but also convicted them to do it. The reading of the Law every seventh year suggests that the Sabbath year was a year dedicated to having a spiritual encounter with God through the reading of His word. The Sabbath year as rightly observed by the scholars I cited in the preceding discussion, provided a time in which God and Israel renewed their covenant relationship with God, assuring Israel of His unfailing commitment to love and protect Israel, and with Israel pledging undivided loyalty to YHWH as the LORD their God. The Sabbath year in this case provided the actual time during which the covenant was renewed and it served at the same time as the sign of that covenant relationship between God and Israel. The Sabbath year in essence served to point to Israel as God's people and to YHWH as Israel's God.

The Sabbath year and the reading of the Law served to challenge Israel to remain true to the covenant.

The concept of appearing before God does not mean to literally seeing the face of God, but to visit Him and pay homage to Him at His sanctuary (Tigay, 1996: 292). According to P.C. Craigie (1976: 371), cited by Merrill (1994: 399), the purpose of the assembly was to provide a forum for regular and formal renewal of the covenant before the LORD at the place He chose. This took place at the sanctuary (Christensen, 1996: 765) where the ark was kept (Tigay, 1996: 292) and in covenant terms constituted the residence of the Great King to whom Israel was held accountable (Merrill, 1994: 400). The Law was read so that the whole community could hear it afresh and pledge itself to recommitment (Merrill, 1994: 400). The teaching's account of God's mighty deeds on behalf of Israel and its presentation of His commandments would inspire people to revere Him and keep His commandments (Tigay, 1996: 292). As long as Israel was in the land, the reading of the Law at the sanctuary had to be done because as generations died and were replaced by new ones, there would be recurring need for instruction and the pledging of loyalty (Merrill, 1994: 400).

The reading of the Law took place in the seventh month of the seventh year. What God required of Israel in response, was a total acceptance of His redemption package which would be reflected in Israel's life by her complete allegiance to the covenant terms. The reading of the Law called Israel to fear God and keep His commandments. This was a condition for Israel to remain in the land.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, I dealt with the theme of love for God. It was determined that God, after delivering Israel from Egypt, commanded Israel to love Him wholeheartedly (Deut 6:4-5) and acknowledge Him alone as God. The love of Israel for God I discovered, would lead one to keeping God's commandments and relating with love to one's fellowmen.

It was also noted that the love in Deuteronomy would help to focus the affections of Israel on the LORD, the Owner of land who would in turn ensure Israel's security in the land.

In the section on curses and blessings, it was found that God's promised blessings to Israel were conditional. If Israel was obedient to God, God assured her of prosperity. If on the other hand Israel disobeyed God disasters of different kinds would follow her including the disaster of being exiled from the land. Israel's stay in the land was thereafter conditional.

The reading of the Law (Deut 31:10-13) was meant to be a covenant renewal ceremony every seventh year. The purpose behind the exercise was to lead the nation to fear the LORD and keep His commandments and this was a condition for Israel to remain in the land.

### **3.4 CONCLUSION**

The motivations found in connection with the Sabbath year in the Covenant Code included the release of Hebrew slaves (Exod 21:1-6) and concern for the poor which entailed allowing the land to lie fallow so that these people could eat from its spontaneous growth (Exod 23:10-11). These motivations in my view served to empower the economically weak members of the Covenant Community and as such went a long way in seeking to restore freedom of the oppressed and restoring economic strength of the weak. These motivations played a role in ensuring that land, especially land belonging to the poor members of the covenant community, remained within the family.

In the theology of the Covenant Code, God is seen as the only God to be worshipped in a particular way, different from the worshipping of Canaanite deities. This concept suggests

that God was to be viewed as Supreme Sovereign Ruler in all domains of Israel's life including her economic life. God is also portrayed in the Covenant Code as the Protector of the weak as demonstrated in the discussion of the Law of the *talion*. The observation was that the God who sought to protect the physical body of the individual would naturally be keen to protect the economic welfare of a person.

In the Book of Exodus, God is portrayed as Creator, Provider, Covenant Maker and Lawgiver. As Creator, God 'created' Israel in Egypt. As Provider He gave them 'land' just as He did when He created the first human beings whom He provided with land over which they were supposed to exercise good stewardship.

As Covenant Maker, God initiated a covenant relationship with Israel and He also gave the Law that was to govern Israel in this covenant relationship and in the land. This constituted a condition for Israel to remain in the land.

In the Deuteronomic Code, the legal motivation for the Sabbath year included the remission of debts (Deut 15:1-11) and the release of Hebrew slaves (Deut 15:12-18). The release of Hebrew slaves was also another motivation for the Sabbath year in the Covenant Code (Exod 21:1-6).

These two important motivations were vehicles of economic empowerment for the poor and must have played a major part in helping retain land within families.

In the Deuteronomic Code, I encountered a number of portrayals of God. In Deuteronomy 6:4-6 God is seen as the only God of Israel who demanded complete allegiance and was to be worshipped in a prescribed way. For Israel to remain in the land, she needed to exercise undivided loyalty to the LORD including proper observance of the Sabbath year.

In Deuteronomy 14:22-29, the law of tithing was similar to the Sabbath year Law in that they are both humanitarian Laws concerned with the welfare of the poor. The God who issued these Laws is a God of compassion and demanded practical godliness from His people. Both Laws created an environment conducive for family land to remain in the family.

The Law on kingship (Deuteronomy 17:14-19) portrayed the king in Israel as a student of the Law, and a person not given to the spirit of materialism. The king in Israel was actually supposed to be exemplary in respecting the property of his subjects and protecting the

property of the vulnerable members of his kingdom. In this way he helped people's land to remain within the family. In the Sabbath year the king was supposed to lead by example in the cancelling of debts and releasing slaves under his rule.

The Law on cities of asylum (Deut 19) revealed God as Protector of those who had problems they could not handle on their own. The God who instituted a law to protect persons who had killed someone accidentally is a God who sympathizes with people who have problems not of their own making, like economic hardships that lead to loss of land.

The Law on First fruits pointed to God as Redeemer and Provider. It reminded the people in need to thank God for redemption and for land. The Sabbath year was supposed to be spent in praising God for these great gifts. This Law encouraged people to operate redemptively toward their needy brothers.

In the book of Deuteronomy, the love God demanded of Israel was love that led to the keeping of the commandments of God and as such required that Israel should hold God's laws including the Sabbath year in high regard. This love, being generous, would manifest itself in the Sabbath year by relieving debtors. This love set up an environment where people respected each other's property.

In the discussion of blessings and curses, God's love is conditional and Israel would be assured of her place in the land if she remained faithful to God.

The reading of the Law was meant to help people to fear God and demonstrate it by keeping His commandments. This was an important condition for Israel to remain in the land.

With these findings, I can conclude that the theological trends in the Covenant Code and the book of Exodus and the theological trends in the Deuteronomistic Code and the book of Deuteronomy favoured the retention of land within the family. With the evidence found in the investigation of the motivations in both the Covenant Code and the Deuteronomistic Code, I can conclude that the Sabbath year had theological implications that favoured the retention of land within the family.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS**

**(Leviticus 1-16, 27)**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

In the Covenant and Deuteronomic Codes I began to discuss the motivation for the Sabbath year legislation in each legal code, followed by examining the theological trends of each code. I concluded by discussing the theological trends in each book. In the book of Leviticus, the approach will be different because in the first place the Sabbath year (Lev 25:1-7) as the central text for this thesis, comprises a chapter on its own (see Chapter Five). At the same time, I want to relate the Sabbath year discussion (Lev 25:1-7) as near as possible to the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26). To facilitate this kind of arrangement, I will begin my discussion by considering first of all the theological trends of the book of Leviticus and then go on to the theological trends in the Holiness Code.

#### **4.2 THEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS (LEV 1-16, 27)**

The goal of this chapter is the identification of the location of the Sabbath year legislation in the larger context of the structure of the book of Leviticus. This is followed by a discussion of the Sabbath year's location in the context of the Holiness Code. I want to discover how the theological trends of each context affected the maintenance of the land within the family.

A number of structures have been proposed by different scholars as constituting the major divisions of the Book of Leviticus. I will consider a few structures proposed by influential Old Testament scholars concerning the Book of Leviticus.

In Hartley's (1992) view, the Book of Leviticus has the following structure (1992: XXXIV):

I. Regulations for Sacrifices (Leviticus 1:1 – 7:38)

- II. Ordination of the Priests and the First Sacrifices at the Tent of Meeting (Leviticus 8:1 – 10:20)
- III. Laws on ritual purity (Leviticus 11:1 – 15:32)
- IV. Regulations for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:1 – 34)
- V. Laws on Holy Living (Leviticus 17:1 – 26:46)
- VI. Laws on Tithes and Offerings (Leviticus 27:1-34)

According to Kaiser (1994: 1003-4), the Book of Leviticus is structured as follows:

- I. The laws of sacrifice (Leviticus 1:1 – 7:38)
- II. Inauguration and worship at the Tabernacle (Leviticus 8:1 – 10:20)
- III. The regulation of clean and unclean (Leviticus 11:1 – 15:33)
- IV. The great Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:1 – 34)
- V. The Holiness Code (Leviticus 17:1 – 24:16)
- VI. Epilogue: Entire Dedication to the Lord (Leviticus 27:1 – 34)

Gerstenberger (1996: 19) proposed the following structure to the Book of Leviticus:

- I. Sacrificial regulations (Leviticus 1-7)
- II. Inaugural service at the Tent of Meeting (Leviticus 8-10)
- III. Purity commandments (Leviticus 11-15)
- IV. Main festival and main regulation concerning sacrifice (Leviticus 16-17)
- V. Regulations for the life of the community (Leviticus 18-20)
- VI. Priestly regulations (Leviticus 21-22)
- VII. Sacral calendar (Leviticus 23-25)
- VIII. Conclusion and continuation (Leviticus 26-27)

The three proposed structures agree in subsections 1, 2, and 3. In subsection 4, Hartley (1992: XXXIV) and Kaiser (1994: 1003-4) concur that the Day of Atonement (Lev 16) constitutes a section on its own. Gerstenberger (1996: 19) joins Leviticus 16 and 17 to form a single section and in this way his structure begins to differ from the structures by the other two scholars. In his structure as a whole Gerstenberger (1996: 19) does not recognize the existence of the Holiness Code as a section that stands on its own and for this reason I will not work with his structure.

Hartley (1992: XXXIV) and Kaiser (1994: 1003-4) recognized the existence of the Holiness Code but they differed in their understanding of its exact scope. In Kaiser's structure the Holiness Code covers chapters 17-24 of Leviticus (1994: 1003-4). In his structure the Sabbath year discussion is outside the Holiness Code.

In Hartley's structure the Holiness Code covers chapters 17-26 of the Book of Leviticus (1992: XXXIV). I agree with the scope suggested by Hartley (1992: XXXIV) which has the support of many other scholars. Wright (1999: 351), for example asserted that scholars have identified two main sources among the priestly writings: the Priestly materials proper or "Priestly Torah" and the Holiness materials or "Holiness School". The Holiness School, he clarified, is the one which was initially identified by scholars with Leviticus 17-26 and as such was called the "Holiness Code". I will therefore work with the structure suggested by Hartley (1992: XXXIV) because it acknowledges the existence of the Holiness Code and portrays its scope correctly. In Hartley's structure the Sabbath year legislation is part of the Holiness Code (1992: XXXIV).

What follows is the structure I will work with:

4.2.1 Regulations for sacrifices (Leviticus 1-7)

4.2.2 Ordination of the priests and the first sacrifices at the Tent of Meeting (8:1-10:20)

4.2.3 Laws on ritual purity (Leviticus 11-15)

4.2.4 Regulations for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16; 23:26-32)

4.3.5 Redemption of land dedicated to God (27:16-25, 28)

#### 4.3.6 Tithing Law (Leviticus 27:30-33)

The treatment of each of these subsections is however not exhaustive. I deal only with certain texts chosen to illustrate the general theological tilt of each subsection.

#### 4.2.1 Regulations for sacrifices (Lev 1-7)

This is a sub-section dwelling exclusively on different kinds of sacrifices. Since the sacrificial system is one of the major themes of the book of Leviticus, I will briefly discuss one of the important kinds of sacrifice in Israel, namely the burnt offering. For reasons to do with the scope of this thesis, I will not cover all the kinds of sacrificial offerings. The reason behind choosing the burnt offering is that this kind of offering was the main sacrifice of the Israelite cult that was offered every morning at the cultic centre (Hartley, 1992: 17).

Other reasons have to do with its antiquity, popularity, versatility and frequency (Milgrom, 1991: 146). It was superior, as Milgrom (1991: 146) further rightly argued, because no creature partook of it but all of it ascended to the Holy One who is superior. This sacrifice, as it were, formed the theological base upon which the entire book of Leviticus rests and for that reason deserves some coverage.

The text which discusses the burnt offering is Leviticus 1:3-4

*“If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect; he must present it at the entrance to the tent of meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD. He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.”*

If the offering was a burnt offering from the herd, it was supposed to be a male without defect (Lev 1: 3). Milgrom (1991: 147) argued that the reason behind choosing the male animal lay in the fact that the male was economically more expendable than the female since the female supplied milk and produced offspring. Hartley (1992: 18) said that the male animal was chosen for the burnt offering because it represented the more valued possession in the ancient Near East ahead of its female counterpart. I think that in the absence of a clear biblical reason justifying the choice of a male animal ahead of the female, the reasons given by these two scholars are more speculative than factual. The best reason I see behind the selection of the male animal is neither economic nor cultural, but theological. The male animal was chosen

for the burnt offering because according to Leviticus 1:1-3, God gave Moses the instruction to choose a male animal.

A member of the herd, a male without defect (*tamim*) was to be offered as a whole offering (Harley 1992: 18). According to Milgrom (1991: 147), the expression ‘without blemish’ translated *tamim* is an adjective from the word *tamam* meaning ‘be complete’ and in the priestly writing only refers to physical perfection of sacrificial animals except for Leviticus 23:15 and Leviticus 25:30 where it is used in referring to time. In elaborating on the quality of animal to be presented as a burnt offering, Hartley (1992: 18) accurately pointed out that the animal had to be free from any blemish or defect, either from birth, by accident or reason of illness. He went on to list the typical defects which caused an animal to be regarded as unfit for sacrifice as: blindness, injury, maimed condition, irregular members, warts or festering sores and damaged testicles (Lev 22: 22-24). According to Kaiser (1994: 1013), the total offering was to be burned on the altar and the burnt parts of the sacrifice became the perfume or sweet incense before God.

My conclusion with regards to the implications of the burnt offering with regard to the Sabbath year is that the Sabbath year was supposed to portray a God who takes pleasure in the worship that came from humans who worshipped Him with all their hearts. The fact that this offering answered every conceivable emotional and psychological need, suggests that the God it portrays is the God who is able to supply all human needs. The fact that God requires perfect gifts from his children implies that the Sabbath year was supposed to be a time dedicated to teaching Israel the principles of faithful stewardship in all areas of life including care of the land and its resources.

The importance attached to worship in Israel suggests that Israel as a nation was not only supposed to inherit the land of Canaan, but that their stay in the land was to be characterized by a wholehearted devotion to YHWH.

#### **4.2.2 Ordination of priests and the first sacrifices at the Tent of Meeting (Leviticus 8:1-10:20)**

I will discuss only one of the aspects covered in this section of Leviticus, namely the ordination of priests. The texts chosen for consideration are Leviticus 8: 6-9; 12; and 22-24 which deals with the ordination of priests. The priestly office seems to have been central to the religious life of the covenant community and must have played a key role in the land of

Israel and therefore an understanding of the significance of the priestly ordination throws more light on the issues of family land and the Sabbath year.

Leviticus 8:6-9 *“Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons forward and washed them with water. He put the tunic on Aaron, tied the sash around him, clothed him with the robe and put the ephod on him by its skilfully woven waistband, so it was fastened on him. He placed the breast piece on him and put the Urim and Thummim in the breast piece. Then he placed the turban on Aaron’s head and set the gold plate, the sacred diadem on the front of it, as the LORD commanded Moses.”*

The ceremony of washing was done so that Aaron and his sons might be ritually clean for the ordination ceremony (Hartley, 1992: 111). Such ablutions have symbolic and hygienic significance even today and are the prerequisite for active participation in the civic life (Lev 15:5 ff) (Gerstenberger, 1996: 108). According to Kaiser (1994: 1060), the ceremonial washing signified the increased participation of the Holy Spirit and it also signified the cleansing from defilements of sin that acted as impediments to the office of the priesthood.

Although each one of the three views above is true to a certain extent, considering the ceremonial character of the context, I think the view by Hartley (1992: 111) is more accurate, namely that the washing of Aaron and his sons rendered them ritually clean for the ordination ceremony.

Leviticus 8:7-9 *“He put the tunic on Aaron, tied the sash around him, clothed him with the robe and put the ephod on him. He also tied the ephod to him by its skilfully woven waistband; so it was fastened on him. He placed the breast piece on him and put the Urim and Thummim in the breast piece. Then he placed the turban on Aaron’s head and set the gold plate, the sacred diadem, on the front of it, as the LORD commanded Moses.”*

According to Hartley (1992: 111), after the washing ceremony, Moses clothed Aaron with special priestly clothes. These priestly vestments constituted the outer symbols of priestly authority (Milgrom, 1991: 501). Hartley (1992: 112) and Gerstenberger (1996: 108) concurred.

The consensus here is that the clothing of the priests to assume their office was an important event which symbolised the priest’s authority to minister.

Leviticus 8:12 *“He poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron’s head and anointed him to consecrate him.”*

The implication of anointing as a sacred right is that the anointed one receives divine sanction and that his person is inviolable (Milgrom, 1991: 153; Gerstenberger, 1996: 110). The purpose of the anointing oil was to set the person or the object apart for service to the Lord (Kaiser, Jr., 1994: 1061; Hartley, 1992: 112).

The scholars cited above all agree that the anointing service set the priesthood apart for holy use in God’s work.

Leviticus 8:23-24 *“Moses slaughtered the ram and took some of its blood and put it on the lobe of Aaron’s right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot. Moses also brought Aaron’s sons forward and put some of the blood on the lobes of their right ears, on the thumbs of their right hands and on the big toes of their right feet.”*

By covering Aaron’s extremities with blood, Moses consecrated him totally to Yahweh (Hartley, 1992: 113). Within the framework of this priestly consecration, the sense of these rites may be first to render the right side of the body, especially oriented towards action, suitable for service to Yahweh (Gerstenberger, 1996: 111). The whole act of applying blood to Aaron’s right ear, right thumbs and right toe had the significance of denoting total surrender to God’s service by Aaron and his sons (Kaiser, 1994: 162). Gerstenberger (1996: 111) said that the reason for anointing the doubly present extremities was presumably that in this way the entirety of the person is affected. The process meant that the ear was dedicated to Yahweh’s instructions while the hands and feet were supposed to carry them out (Hartley, 1992: 113).

The shared view is that the ceremony of applying blood to the right ears, right thumbs and big right toes of the priest consecrated them to whole hearted service to Yahweh.

Leviticus 8: 26-29 *“Then from the basket of the bread made without yeast, which was before the LORD, he took a cake of bread, and one made with oil and a wafer; he put these on the fat portions and on the right thigh. He put all these in the hands of Aaron and his sons and waived them before the LORD as a wave offering. Then Moses took them from their hands and burned them on the altar on top of the burnt offering as an ordination offering, a pleasing aroma, an offering made to the LORD by fire. He also took the breast - Moses share*

*of the ordination ram - and waved it before the LORD as a wave offering as the LORD commanded Moses.”*

The induction into office associated with the special offering (Lev 8:25-29) is portrayed more expansively (Gerstenberger, 1996: 111).

The connection between this ritual of filling Aaron's hands and the technical term for ordination, *milluim*, literally meaning 'the filling' is quite visible (Hartley, 1992: 114). Gerstenberger (1996: 111) pointed out that the designation of the sacrificial animal as the 'ram of hand filling' (v. 22) alludes to the central motif. He went further to state that hand filling is the official investiture of a priest through a financially powerful employer (Judges 17:5, 12), and involves primarily the fixing of a salary. Kaiser (1994: 1062) noted that the Hebrew term for ordination is *milluim*, meaning 'fillings.' He went on to conclude that this symbolic act pointed to the fact that with the responsibilities of the priesthood, Aaron's hands and his sons' hands were full.

The general consensus is that the ordination service signified the fact that Aaron's hands and his sons' hands were filled with the new responsibility of priesthood.

From my own perspective, the link between the ordination service to the Sabbath year and to land retention within the family, though not explicitly stated, can be easily deduced. The LORD, who set Aaron and his sons apart to constitute a holy priesthood, also set the Sabbath year apart to constitute holy time. Both institutions point to a God who places great importance on holiness. By the act of ordination, Aaron's hands and his sons' hands were filled with the responsibility of priesthood. This reality suggests that the Sabbath year, by being set apart for holy use by God was supposed to be used exclusively for the purpose for which it was set apart. It is as Israel obeyed these laws that she was assured of a permanent place in the land. Disobedience would bring death and forfeiture of land inheritance (Lev 26:3-16).

#### **4.2.3 Laws on ritual purity (Leviticus 11-15)**

This section in Leviticus also does not explicitly refer to the Sabbath or to land. It is a section concerned with ritual purity. The passage that I will consider is Leviticus 12:1-8, a passage dealing with purification rites associated with childbirth.



Leviticus 12:1-6 “The LORD said to Moses: “*Say to the Israelites: A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman is to wait for thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until her days of purification are over. If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding. When the days of purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the tent of meeting a year old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. He shall offer them before the LORD to make atonement for her and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood.*”

The laws of ritual purity regulated the birth of a child and the woman who gave birth became impure as if she were having her normal monthly period (Lev 15:19-24) (Gerstenberger, 1996: 149). The impurity of the parturient was common to many cultures (Milgrom, 1991: 746). It was the discharge of blood that rendered a new mother unclean as the three references to the discharge of blood (*lochia*) in these verses indicate (Hartley, 1992: 168). The fact that the sacrifices a woman brought after childbirth were brought only after the impurity had disappeared is proof that their limitation was not medicinal (Milgrom, 1991: 756).

The surfacing trend here is that a woman was rendered impure by the discharge of blood after childbirth.

The whole offering which the parturient was supposed to bring might have been a praise offering for God’s blessing expressed in the gift of a child (Hartley, 1992: 170). Milgrom (1991: 758), citing Koch (1959: 79) suggested that the whole offering was given in thanksgiving for a child. He went further to suggest that the fact that the parturient is purified by the action of both sacrifices indicates that the purpose of the burnt offering is expiatory. In Hartley’s view, the two offerings expiated the parturient from defilements of human sinfulness and gave her freedom to worship at the sanctuary and touch that which is holy (1992: 170). According to Kaiser (1994: 1062), the whole offering was one of dedication to God and gratefulness for God’s goodness during the delivery and God’s protection of the child during ritual days of infancy. He further stated that the sin offering did not teach that the

act of conception is sinful but that all who conceive are also at one and the same time sinners and that even those born cannot escape the sinful human condition (Ps 51:15).

The prominent trends here are that the sacrifices a woman brought after childbirth served a thanksgiving and expiatory function.

The ritual of thanksgiving for childbirth pointed to God as Provider who gave gifts of children to human beings. In this ceremony a parent thanked God for the gift of a child. The Sabbath year was meant to carry over the spirit of thankfulness that characterized the ceremony of thanksgiving for childbirth. The Sabbath year needed to challenge Israel to be grateful to God not only for the gift of children but for all other gifts and especially the gift of land which provided the resources that helped children to grow in a healthy way. The Sabbath year was further meant to challenge Israel to affirm the full humanity of all persons, regardless of gender since a burnt offering was required for any child whether male or female. It was also a time when people were supposed to reflect on God's gifts and praise God in return. The Sabbath year was an appropriate time to celebrate God as the great Giver and Forgiver. Land, as I view it, was among the gifts people were supposed to celebrate and guard jealously because it would give security to the children that were being born.

#### **4.2.4 Regulations for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16; 23:26-32)**

The regulation for the Day of Atonement is a division in itself for it begins with a historical reference in the introductory formula and concludes with a compliance report (Hartley, 1992: 217). The atonement of the tenth of *Tishri* is the first annual holiday (Gerstenberger, 1996: 213). Hartley (1992 217) noted that this holiday stands at the center of the Book of Leviticus and the Book of Leviticus is itself the center of the Pentateuch. He went on to state that the literary position of this holiday highlights the importance of this solemn day for the Israelite community.

The consensus of the two scholars cited is that the Day of Atonement was a very important day. The interest we have in this day is because of its nature as a day of rest and an important day in Israel.

Leviticus 16 has a total of thirty-four verses and I will not be able to discuss all of these due to the scope of this thesis. I will cover a number of chosen verses. These are Leviticus 16:11-22 which describes in summary form the main ceremony and purpose of the Day of

Atonement. The other verses to be covered are Leviticus 16:29-31 which discuss the nature of rest of the Day of Atonement.

Leviticus 16:11 *“Aaron shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering.”*

Commenting on the instruction to Aaron to bring a bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, Milgrom (1991: 1019) said that the purpose was to make one aware that the rest of the priests would benefit from the sacrifice. Hartley (1992: 236) concurred with the position suggested by Milgrom (1991: 1019).

Leviticus 16:12-13 *“He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. He is to put incense on the fire before the LORD and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the testimony, so that he will not die.”*

The general view held in connection with this text is that when the high priest appeared before the LORD in the Holy of Holies, he needed a cloud to protect him from the presence of God, although Milgrom (1991: 1031) contends that the cloud to shield the high priest was produced by a substance other than incense, whilst Hartley (1992: 239) and Gerstenberger (1996: 215) are of the opinion that the cloud came from the burning incense.

Leviticus 16:16 *“He is to take some of the bull’s blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover (khipher): then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover (khipher). He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the atonement cover and in front of it. In this way he will make atonement for the most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same with the Tent of Meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness.”*

Through transgressions against the commandments, the community of faith was continually heaping guilt upon itself and because God dwelled in a house in the midst of this flawed guilt ridden people, some portion of the substance of that sin was also bound to come into contact with and pollute the sanctuary (Gerstenberger, 1996: 218). All cases of uncleanness of the people polluted the sanctuary to some measure (Hartley, 1992: 240). Here the term pollution

(*mittum' ot*) refers to the ritual impurities described in Leviticus 11- 15 and the moral impurities generated by the violation of the prohibitive commandments (Milgrom, 1991: 1033). The rite of sprinkling the blood cleansed the Holiest Place from the impurities of the Israelite transgressions that have penetrated into the Holiest Place (Hartley, 1992: 240).

Once it has been determined that the verb *khipher* literary means “purge”, that is to expunge impurity, the function of all the blood manipulations becomes clear; to purge the sanctuary of its accumulated pollution (Milgrom, 1991: 1033). The rite cleanses the Holy Place from the acts of rebellion (*pesa*) and from the “sins of the Israelites” (*hattat*) (Hartley, 1992: 240). The noun rebellion (*pesa*) originates in the political sphere, where it denotes rebellion of a vassal against his overlord, and by extension it is transferred to the divine realm where it denotes rebellion against God (Milgrom, 1991: 1034).

The important trends here are that the sins cleansed from the sanctuary on the Day of Atonement involved wilful sins and all other sins of lesser magnitude.

Leviticus 16:17-19 “No one is to be in the Tent of Meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel. Then he shall come out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it. He shall take some of the bull’s blood and put it on all the horns of the altar. He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites.”

With this rite the high priest cleansed the altar and sanctified it from the impurities of the people (Hartley, 1992: 240). Since blood has been put on both the Atonement Slate and on the altar of whole offering, the entirety of the sanctuary, both the inside and the outside are cleansed (Hartley, 1992: 240).

In essence, both scholars rightly affirm that the Holiest Place and the Holy Place were to be cleansed on the Day of Atonement by this ritual.

Leviticus 16:20-22 *“When Aaron had finished making atonement for the most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the he goat, he is to lay both hands on the head of a live goat and confess over it all the evils and rebellion of the Israelites- all their sins and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.”*

The high priest was to place both hands on the live goat’s head and confess over it all the sins of the people (Hartley, 1992: 241). The formula used here is comprehensive, containing the three customary words in Hebrew for “guilt, transgressions and sins” (Gerstenberger, 1996: 220). The two-handed ceremonial served a transference function, namely to convey by confession the sins of Israel onto the head of the goat (Milgrom, 1991: 1041, concurred by Gerstenberger, 1996: 220 and Hartley, 1992: 241).

The consensus of the scholars cited above is that the ceremony of leaning with two hands over the live goat on the Day of Atonement symbolized transference of Israel’s sins to that animal on that day.

Through gesture and word, the guilt was given over into the wilderness, thus carrying Israel’s guilt to *Azazel*, who was believed to be some wilderness demon (Gerstenberger, 1996: 221). The wilderness area where the goat was taken was in ancient times believed to be the domain of evil spirits (Hartley, 1992: 241). The purpose of dispatching the goat to the wilderness was to remove it from human habitation (Milgrom, 1991: 1045). The scapegoat was to remain in the wilderness, dead or alive and under no circumstance was it permitted to return to the human society that had sent it out (Gerstenberger, 1996: 221, concurred by Hartley, 1992: 241). The prominent trends are that on the Day of Atonement, the high priest transferred the sins of Israel onto the live goat, also known as the goat of *Azazel*. The goat was taken into the wilderness, a place believed to be the abode of demons. The goat was not allowed to return and have contact with the community since it was laden with sins and had a terrible capacity to pollute the society.

The outstanding concept in my study of Leviticus 16:11-22, is that the Day of Atonement paints a picture of a God who forgives. He not only forgave Israel of their sins but He cleansed the sanctuary from sin and opened a new chapter in His relationship with Israel.

The Day of Atonement in my view stood as a special day when God and Israel entered into a reconciled relationship because Israel's sins were forgiven even at a national level. It was indeed a day that represented harmony between God and His people. A God who cares to the extent of forgiving Israel even of her sins of rebellion is a God who could be counted on to give Israel the security of land. He is a God who not only wanted Israel in the land, he also wanted them as a spiritually clean people and He provided for that cleanness through the sanctuary service.

Considered as times of solemn rest in the Pentateuch, I see the Day of Atonement and the Sabbath year as times that needed to be characterized by a conscious and deliberate focus on God the author of true rest. In other words, these sacred times were not meant to be viewed as times to honour human achievers as if they were monuments erected in honour of some human hero. Rather, they were to be viewed as times to recognize God's place in the life. The Day of Atonement, in keeping with the work that the LORD did for His people on this day, was meant to direct the focus of Israel on God's forgiveness, whilst the Sabbath year needed to help focus the eyes of humanity on God's creative power, His providential care for humanity with the gifts of life, land and spirituality. Divorced from God as the centre of its focus, the Sabbath year would lose its meaning, purpose and function.

#### **4.2.5 Redemption of land dedicated to God (Leviticus 27:16-25, 28)**

In this section I will discuss the law of the redemption of land dedicated to God (Lev 27:16-25; 28) and the law of redemption of tithes of land (Lev 27:30-33).

Leviticus 27:14-15 *"If a man dedicates his house as something holy to the LORD, the priest will judge its quality as good or bad. Whatever the quality the priest then sets to it will remain. If the man who dedicates his house redeems it, he must add a fifth to its value, and the house will again be his."*

House and land property constituted the third category of possessions that could be pledged to Yahweh (Gerstenberger, 1996: 443). Leviticus 27:14-25 is a speech on regulations on items consecrated as dedication (*yaqdish*) to Yahweh (Hartley, 1992: 482). 'Consecration' can be defined as a transfer from the realm of the profane to the realm of the holy (Milgrom, 2001: 2381). Dedication or consecration is a broader term than "vow" and it stands for anything that is turned over to the sanctuary (Hartley, 1992: 482). Examples include sacrifices (Lev 22:2-3), dedications to the sanctuary (Exod 28:28), and the firstborn (Num

3:13) (Milgrom, 2001: 2381). Gerstenberger (1996: 443) says that the consecration had to do with sanctifying or making something holy, to dedicate or assign to God.

The shared consensus here is that a thing that was dedicated was turned over from ordinary use to use in the sanctuary and assigned to God.

If a person dedicated a house to Yahweh, the priest was to determine the value of that house (Hartley, 1992: 482). Gerstenberger (1996: 443) concurred. All houses were included, even town houses, which remained the buyer's inalienable property if they were not redeemed within the first year following their sale (Lev 25:29-30) (Milgrom, 2001: 2381). In Hartley's view, the house was most likely one in a walled city, which was not subject to the laws of the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:29-30) (1992: 482). The one who dedicated a house could redeem it by paying the amount set by the priest plus twenty percent (Hartley, 1992: 482 concurred by Gerstenberger, 1996: 443 and Milgrom 2001: 2382).

I think of the two views above, the houses discussed are those that were in the cities. The silence concerning the year of Jubilee is in line with the ruling on houses in walled cities whose redemption was not tied to the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:30).

Leviticus 27:16 *"if a man dedicates to the LORD part of his family land, its value is set according to the amount of seed required for it - fifty shekels of silver to a homer of barley seed."*

A person might have dedicated to Yahweh a field that was part of his own inheritance (Hartley, 1992: 482). As he could sell only the usufruct of his ancestral property, a man could consecrate only the land's crop (Milgrom, 2001: 2382). In Gerstenberger's view, this was inconceivable given the fact that all land actually belonged to God (1996: 443). Hartley (1992: 482) on the other hand, accepted that land could be consecrated to YHWH and he stated that the first criteria for determining its value was according to the amount of seed needed for sowing that parcel. Milgrom (2001: 2382) concurred.

The important consensus here is that land could be consecrated to YHWH (Milgrom, 2001: 2382 and Hartley, 1992: 482). The other concept surfacing here is that the way of determining the value of such land was dependent on the amount of seed needed for sowing that piece of land.

A field requiring one sack of barley reckoned according to the year of Jubilee was worthy fifty shekels, with one shekel thus being figured per year (Gerstenberger, 1996: 444). Hartley (1992: 482) and Milgrom (2001: 2383) concurred. The emerging consensus is that the amount of fifty shekels was the amount paid for a piece of land that could be sown with a homer of barley seed. This amount was adequate until the year of Jubilee.

Leviticus 27:17-18 *“If he dedicates his field during the year of Jubilee, the value that has been set remains. But if he dedicates his field after the Jubilee, the priest will determine the value according to the number of years that remain until the next Year of Jubilee, and its set value will be reduced.”*

The value placed on land dedicated in the Year of Jubilee stands but the value of land dedicated after the Year of Jubilee had to be set in proportion to the years to the next Jubilee (Hartley, 1992: 483). If a vow was made between the free years, the annual portions that had already elapsed were discounted (Gerstenberger, 1996: 444). In considering the value of the land the years that were subtracted are the years that the land was held by the sanctuary from the previous Jubilee (Milgrom, 2001: 2383).

The conclusion reached here by different scholars cited is that for land dedicated after the Jubilee, the value was to be set in proportion to the years to the next Jubilee.

Leviticus 27:19 *“If a man who dedicates the field wishes to redeem it, he must add a fifth to its value, and the field will again become his.”*

A person who dedicated a field had the opportunity to redeem that field by paying twenty percent above its current worth (Hartley, 1992: 483). Gerstenberger (1996: 444) concurred.

The general consensus is that a person who dedicated a field had the opportunity to redeem that field at a surcharge of twenty percent.

Leviticus 27:20 *“If, however, he does not redeem the field, or if he has sold it to someone else, it can never be redeemed.”*

According to Hartley (1992: 483), if the original owner of land did not redeem it but sold it to another person, he also lost the right to redeem it. Gerstenberger (1996: 444) pointed out that verse 20 is difficult to understand - here someone neither assigns to the temple a field consecrated to Yahweh, nor purchases it back from the temple, but rather sells it elsewhere.



He went on to point out that in the first place, the free sale of land is restricted and that secondly, this particular use of the field violated the vow and represented a serious insult to Yahweh. Milgrom (2001: 2384) similarly pointed out that if the owner sold his land after he had consecrated it, he had engaged in a deception and that is why the land was forfeited to the sanctuary. Gerstenberger (1996: 444) concurred.

The important consensus here is that if one sold consecrated land to another person, such a person lost his right to redeem the land. Secondly, the scholars cited here regard the selling of consecrated land as an evil perpetrated to God Himself. The natural consequence of such action was permanent loss of land by the owner to the sanctuary. This law indirectly called on people to desist from careless disposal of land. It is a law that favoured retention of land within the family.

Leviticus 27:21 *“When the field is released in the Jubilee it will become holy like a field devoted to the LORD: it will become the property of priests.”*

Hartley (1992: 483) said a devoted field became the inheritance of the priests. Gerstenberger (1996: 444) explained that while a sacrificial animal pledged to Yahweh immediately became holy, land assigned to God might not come into Yahweh’s exclusive possession until after fifty years. Milgrom (2001: 2385) argued that if someone consecrated land after selling it, he thereby indicated that he did not want the land back and the land became sanctuary property after the Jubilee.

The shared view here is that if someone sold consecrated land, at the time of Jubilee, such land became the property of the sanctuary managed by priests. It was then holy property.

Leviticus 27:22-24 *“If a man dedicates to the LORD a field he has bought, which is not part of his family land, the priest will determine its value up to the Year of Jubilee and the man must pay its value on that day as something holy to the LORD. In the Year of Jubilee the field will revert to the person from whom he bought it, the one whose land it was.”*

If a person dedicated a field that constituted purchased property and was not part of his tribal inheritance, such a field was to be returned to its original owner at the Year of Jubilee (Hartley, 1992: 483). Gerstenberger (1996: 445) and Milgrom (2001: 2386) concurred.

The emerging consensus here is that if someone bought land and then consecrated it to Yahweh, such land would revert back to the original owner from whom it was bought come the year of Jubilee. This law clearly helped land to remain within the family. In the year of Jubilee, even if such land had been consecrated to Yahweh by the buyer, it was returned to the original owner who had the right of inheritance.

Leviticus 27:25 *“Every value is to be set according to the sanctuary shekel, twenty gerahs to the shekel.”*

According to Milgrom (2001: 2387) the *gerah* was the smallest of coins and was one-twentieth not only of the temple shekel (Exod 30:13) but also of the commercial shekel (Gen 23:16). Hartley (1992: 484) concurred and went on to state that the valuations of land were to be paid in the shekel of the sanctuary.

The shared consensus here is that the currency used in the valuations during land transactions was the *gerah* which was the smallest of coins.

Leviticus 27:28 *“But nothing that a man owns and devotes to the LORD, whether man or animal or family land may be sold or redeemed: everything so devoted is most holy to the LORD.”*

The weightiest vow was called the *herem* (the devoted or proscribed thing) (Hartley, 1992: 484). Gerstenberger (1996: 445) stated that the ban formula is mentioned here in connection with the inheritance of property. He went on to state that this consecratory procedure took effect more quickly and would immediately assign a field over into Yahweh’s hand.

Gerstenberger (1996: 445) pointed out that anything banned (consecrated) was to be holy not in the simple sense, but rather in the elevated sense, namely, most holy. Hartley (1992: 484) similarly noted that anything that became *herem* (devoted) was most holy to Yahweh and could not be redeemed. Neither sale nor redemption was permitted with *herem* (Milgrom, 2001: 2393). A devoted thing could not be used for any other purpose than at the sanctuary and by the priests (Hartley, 1992: 484). The surrender of one’s possessions through a *herem* formula surpassed the pledge of a vow, and is analogous to the custom of war according to which the enemy is utterly annihilated as a sacrifice to the victorious deity (Gerstenberger, 1996: 447).

The emerging trend here is that once something was devoted to Yahweh through a *herem* it could not be redeemed but became holy and was to be used only for divine purposes by priests. This law clearly points out how a family could permanently lose its land. The law otherwise mandated that all land reverted to original owners in the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:10, 28). What is important to note here is that the law itself did not encourage people to consecrate their land to YHWH by a *herem*. The choice to do so lay in the hands of the owners of land.

In summary, the law concerning redemption of land dedicated to the LORD said that such land was redeemable with a surcharge of one fifth of the price of the land. The value placed upon land dedicated in the Year of Jubilee stands but the value of land dedicated after the Year of Jubilee was set in proportion to the years to the next Jubilee. If a person sold dedicated land to someone, the seller lost his right to redeem that land because he had acted deceptively. Such land was given over to the priests in the Year of Jubilee. In the Year of Jubilee, all land, except land that was declared *herem* (devoted) reverted to original owners, those who possessed the right of inheritance. Land that was declared *herem* (devoted) was taken over by the priests permanently.

A conclusion that can be drawn from the laws of redemption of dedicated land is that such pieces of land were redeemed at a surcharge of twenty percent. Such land reverted to its original owners in the Year of Jubilee. Like the Sabbath Year Law, these Jubilee Year instructions placed high value on land and how it was handled by human beings. In the Sabbath Year the land was supposed to be given rest from human interference whilst in the laws on redemption of land, human beings are instructed on how to manage sales of land and the consecrating of land to Yahweh. As one examines the laws on redemption of land and the Year of Jubilee, it emerges clearly that God not only wanted land to rest in the Sabbath Year but that He also wanted land to remain in the hands of original owners who possessed the right of inheritance.

#### **4.2.6 Tithing Law (Leviticus 27:30-33)**

Leviticus 27:30-33 “A *tithe of everything from the land whether grain from the soil, or first from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD. If a man redeems any of his tithes, he must add a fifth of the value to it. The entire tithe of the herd and flock - every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod, will be holy to the LORD. He must not pick out*

*the good from the bad or make any substitution. If he does make a substitution, both the animal and its substitute become holy and cannot be redeemed.”*

All the tithe of the produce of the field and the fruit of the trees belongs to Yahweh (Deut 14:22-26) (Hartley, 1992: 485). The use of *'eres* instead of *sadeh* (Lev 27:16-24) indicates that tithes are due from the entire land; not only from crops of cultivated fields, but also from wild crops such as fruits (Milgrom, 2001: 2396). The taxes of natural produce are collected for Yahweh - that is, for the temple and priests (Lev 27:30, 32b) (Gerstenberger, 1996: 447). The tithe was classified as holy to Yahweh and could not be disposed of freely (Hartley, 1992: 485).

The emerging consensus among scholars cited is that the tithe was required not only from crops of the field but also from the entire land. The tithe was regarded as holy to the LORD to be used by the priests and at the sanctuary. Any of these tithes may be redeemed if its owner pays to the sanctuary its value plus twenty percent (Hartley, 1992: 485). The possibility of a monetary substitution payment applied in the case of harvest yields with a twenty percent surcharge (Lev 27:30) (Gerstenberger, 1996: 447). The crop tithe could be sold and was redeemable (Milgrom, 2001: 2401). This alternative was confined to the produce of the field, for the law did not prescribe any substitute for an animal that belonged to Yahweh by right (Hartley, 1992: 485).

The emerging consensus here is that the tithes of harvest yields was redeemable and one had to pay a surcharge of twenty percent.

From these highlights one can deduce the fact that by demanding the tithe of crops from the fields and from the entire land, God in a way claimed to be the ultimate Owner of both the produce of the land and the land itself. The requirement of a tithe of the land by the LORD was His way of instilling into the minds of the people that he was the ultimate Owner of the land and they were but tenants. People were thus made to realize that they were accountable to God for the way they used land and its produce.

All flocks were to be tithed (Hartley, 1992: 485). All harvest yields as well as all herds were to be tithed (Gerstenberger, 1996: 447). The animal tithe was limited to quadrupeds that could be sacrificed and thus was intended for the altar (Milgrom, 2001: 2400).

The emerging consensus here is that the tithe of animals considered only those animals that could be sacrificed on the altar.

Discussing the method used in determining the tithe, Hartley (1992: 485) suggested that the increment of a flock or a herd was passed through a line and every tenth member was pointed out by a staff like that of a shepherd and then marked for dedication to the sanctuary. Milgrom (2001: 2399) cited the actual practice that took place at the end of the second Temple times. In this practice calves were brought to a shed and they were caused to come out of the shed in a single file and each tenth calf was declared to be the tithe. According to Gerstenberger (1996: 447), presumably the number of head in the herd was counted once annually and every tenth animal was assigned to God.

The emerging consensus is that the tithe of animals was taken from the increment by counting the head of either the herd or flock. The tenth animal in each case was the tithe and belonged to Yahweh.

After an animal was marked, the shepherd did not make a substitution (Hartley, 1992: 485). It was not permitted to exchange a tithed animal and the right of redemption did not apply (Gerstenberger, 1996: 447). According to Milgrom (2001: 2401) a tithe replacement could come from only the same species. I agree with Hartley (1992) and Gerstenberger (1996) in saying that an animal marked for tithing could not be exchanged. Milgrom's position that a tithe replacement could come from only the same species contradicts the clear instructions of Leviticus 27:33, which says: "He must not pick out the good from the bad or make any substitution. If he does make a substitution, both the animal and its substitution become holy and cannot be redeemed."

The animal that was selected for the tithe became holy and could not be redeemed (Hartley, 1992: 485). In contrast to the crop tithe which could be redeemed, the right of redemption did not apply to an animal that was tithed (Gerstenberger, 1996: 447).

The emerging consensus is that the tithe of animals had to do with animals that could be sacrificed. The increment of the animals is what was tithed. Once an animal was tithed it became holy and belonged to God. An animal that was tithed could not be exchanged and it was irredeemable.

The whole concept of tithing in my view pointed to God as the ultimate Owner of our material possessions. By paying tithes, people recognize God as the Owner and Giver. Just as in the material sphere the tithe is holy, in the temporal sphere, the Sabbath year and many other Old Testament festivals of Yahweh constituted holy time to be used only for divine purposes. Just as God was strict on how the tithe was calculated and used, He was also strict on how the Sabbath year time was used since God is Sovereign over both our time and our possessions.

### **4.3 THEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE HOLINESS CODE (Leviticus 17-26)**

The goal of this subsection is to select and discuss verses from the Holiness Code that have a direct theological correspondence to the Fallow Year Law (Lev 25:1-8) and retention of land within the family. Below is the outline that I am going to follow to briefly discuss the Holiness Code:

4.3.1 The introductory formula (Leviticus 17:1)

4.3.2 The call of Israel to obey Divine decrees (Leviticus 18:4)

4.3.3 Divine punishment for sexual perversions (Leviticus 18:24-29)

4.3.4 The call of Israel to a life of holiness (Leviticus 19:1-3)

4.3.5 The Sabbath Law (Leviticus 23:3)

4.3.6 The day of First Fruits (Leviticus 23:9-11)

4.3.7 The Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23-25)

4.3.8 The Jubilee Law (Leviticus 25:8-55)

#### **4.3.1 The Introductory Formula (Leviticus 17:1)**

Leviticus 17:1-2 says “*Yahweh spoke to Moses, Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites and say to them ‘This is what the LORD has commanded. ’*”

This introductory formula occurs several times in the Holiness Code (Lev 18:1; 19:1; 20:1; 21:1; 22:1; 22:17) including Leviticus 25 where it occurs at the beginning of the promulgation of the Sabbath year law. According to Hartley (1992: 269), this full

introductory formula signals the beginning of a new section. According to Milgrom (2001:1451) verses 1-2 serve to introduce the whole of Leviticus 25. Milgrom (2001: 1451) went on to point out that according to some rabbis this formula emphasizes that YHWH's word may not be paraphrased by Moses but must be delivered verbatim.

The introductory formula serves to point to the Divine source and authority behind the messages it introduced.

#### **4.3.2 Call of Israel to obey Divine decrees (Leviticus 18:4)**

Leviticus 18:4 *“You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees, I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them, I am the LORD.”*

The instruction is of interest at this point because it is repeated in Leviticus 25:18 in the context of the Sabbath year law and the Jubilee law. According to Hartley (1992: 293) the word *mishpatim* (translated here as laws) refers to laws in general and the word *huqotai* (translated here as my decrees) comes from the root *hqq* and refers to definitive decrees, particularly those prescribed by God. Milgrom (2001: 1520) similarly asserted that the term *huqqa* is derived from the verb inscribe and it denotes a law inscribed by God.

The consensus of the scholars just cited is that decrees were laws (*huqqa*) inscribed by God whilst the *mishpatim* were general laws that could be deduced logically. In the context of Leviticus 18:4 and Leviticus 25:18, God is the source of both the *huqotai* (my decrees) and *mishpatim* (laws). In Leviticus 18 the decrees and laws enjoined are laws on sexual relations, whilst in Leviticus 25 the decrees and laws enjoined are the Sabbath year law and the Jubilee law. The God portrayed by these laws is a God who is concerned about how human beings guarded the sanctity of their body temples from sexual perversions. He is also a God who is concerned about how humans guarded holy times like the Sabbath year and the Jubilee year from pollution by human selfish practices.

#### 4.3.3 Divine punishments for sexual perversions (Leviticus 18:24-29)

Leviticus 18:24-29 *“Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin and the land vomited out its inhabitants, but you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you; and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. Everyone who does any of these detestable things – such persons must be cut off from their people.”*

These instructions were given to Israel in the context of laws on sexual perversions (Lev 18:1-23). According to Hartley (1992: 298) these laws were given in order to prevent Israel from adopting the various sexual practices of the peoples who inhabited Canaan.

Leviticus 18:24 *“Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled.”*

From a historical perspective, “the nations” refers to the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Palestine: the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hittites and Jebusites (Gerstenberger, 1996: 255). The violation of prohibitions listed in chapter 18 leads to banishment from the land. The rationale is that the land becomes polluted and vomits out its inhabitants (Milgrom, 2001: 1572). Hartley (1992: 298) pointed out that these sexual practices defile God’s people. Israel’s polytheistic neighbors energetically pursued fertility rites to ensure the fertility of their fields, flocks and households.

The consensus here is that God strongly prohibited sexual immorality in Israel as was practiced by former inhabitants of the land of Canaan.

Leviticus 18:25 *“Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sins, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.”*

If the people defile themselves by immorality, particularly sexual practices, the land would become so nauseated by such behaviour that it would vomit out its inhabitants (Hartley, 1992: 298). That human sin pollutes the land is an axiom that pervades all of scripture, but nowhere is it so clearly stated as here that exile is the automatic built in punishment for land



pollution (Milgrom, 2002: 1572). It is God Himself who administers the emetic causing the land to vomit out its inhabitants (Hartley, 1992: 298).

The scholars cited are in agreement that if people sinned, especially engaging in sexual immorality, God would visit their sin by driving them out of the land. This theme is repeated in Leviticus 25: 27-29. For this reason I will address these verses. I will briefly consider Leviticus 25:26 which is a text similar to Leviticus 18:4:

*“But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things.”*

I have discussed the meaning of this instruction and the meanings of ‘my decrees’ (*huqotai*) and laws (*mishpatim*) in connection with Leviticus 18:4. What I established was that decrees and laws in this context refer to divine instructions that came from God and were directed to Israel. The God portrayed here is a holy God who upholds moral purity and expected His people, the nation of Israel to abstain from the sexual immorality of their neighbors. If Israel disobeyed God, and chose to go the way of her sexually immoral neighbors she would meet with the divine punishment and forfeit her place in the land of her heritage.

By implication the Sabbath Year was supposed to be a time when Israel contemplated on moral purity and cultivated a deeper relationship with God.

#### **4.3.4 The call of Israel to a life of holiness (Leviticus 19:1-3)**

*Leviticus 19:1-3 The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy. Each of you must respect his mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the LORD your God.’”*

The text is of interest because of its instruction to Israel to keep the Sabbath holy, among other things. According to Hartley (1992: 291), this speech opens with the formula of God’s self identification: “I am Yahweh your God”. By calling Himself “your God”, God is identifying Himself with His people just as He did with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod 3:6, 15). God’s formula of self-introduction is used more frequently in Leviticus 19 than elsewhere in the Old Testament (Gerstenberger, 1996: 261). According to Milgrom (2001: 1602), whereas in the Decalogue YHWH identifies Himself as the God of the Exodus, here He is identified as God the holy.

These self-introduction formulae function to locate the authority of a passage, law, or summons to obedience in the name of the giver of that word namely Yahweh and consequently in obeying these laws, the people express their loyalty to Yahweh (Hartley, 1992: 292).

Leviticus 19:3 calls on the people: *“You shall be holy, for I am holy.”*

This sentence stands like a primary superscription of the entire collection of norms (Gerstenberger, 1996: 261). Milgrom (2001: 1604) also contended that the Holiness command here differs from all others in that it heads a chapter and thereby constitutes a generalization.

The general consensus is that the call to holiness was supposed to be in response of Israel to the totality of the commands issued in Leviticus 19.

Israel was to make herself holy by separating herself from sin and all that defiles in order to experience the sanctifying presence of God (Hartley 1992:312). Milgrom (2001: 1604) asserted that holiness implies abstentions even within performance of positive acts. The *imitatio dei* implied by this verse is that just as God differs from human beings, so should Israel differ from the nations (20:26), a meaning corroborated by the generalization that encloses this chapter (v.37).

The outstanding trend here is that Israel was to be holy just as God is holy. This state could be realized by Israel if she separated herself from sin and if she separated herself from the practices of the nations around her.

Leviticus 19:3 *“Each of you must respect his mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths, I am the LORD your God.”*

“Two basic commandments lead this speech and the first one, fearing one’s parents, is the foundation of social morality. The second, keeping the Sabbath, is essential for spiritual vitality” (Hartley, 1992: 312). Milgrom (2001: 1608) argues that the author of Leviticus 19:3 had the Decalogue in mind. He went further and pointed out that the fact that this one verse combines a quintessentially ethical commandment with a quintessentially ritualistic one, is proof, corroborated by the rest of the chapter, that in the Holiness Code’s value system both ethics and ritual are of equal rank.

According to Hartley (1992: 313) the Sabbath served as the seal of covenant and the covenant committed Israel to an intimate relationship with God. Milgrom (2001: 1611) also pointed out that the Sabbath ends in duties toward God whilst the parental commandment heads the list of duties toward persons. To foster the vitality of the relationship with God, the Sabbath was instituted as a special day for every family in Israel to worship God (Hartley, 1992: 313).

The emerging trends here are that the God who is holy calls Israel to social morality through the parental commandment and then He calls Israel to spiritual vitality through the observance of the Sabbath.

The other thing noted is that the Sabbath fostered the relationship of human beings to God. The insights gained here serve to point to the fact that in the Holiness Code the Sabbath law existed either in the form of special days (Lev 19:3; 23:3) or in the form of special years (Lev 25:2-7; 9-54). If the Fallow year (Lev 25:2-7) was to be of value to Israel, it needed to assimilate the spiritual vitality of the Sabbath day. Not only was the land to rest in this year, but the people also needed to take advantage of this rest period of the land to grow strong spiritually.

#### **4.3.5 Sabbath Law (Leviticus 23:3)**

The next text under consideration is the Sabbath commandment in Leviticus 23:3. Whereas in Leviticus 19:3 the Sabbath commandment is stated in the form of a command without detail, in Leviticus 23:3 it is articulated with detail:

*“There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD.”*

The root *sbt* means to stop work, to cease from doing something, to rest and to stress that the Sabbath is a day of total rest in honour of Yahweh. The phrase “a Sabbath of solemn rest” is used (Hartley, 1992: 375). Gerstenberger (1996: 341) on the other hand argues that the Sabbath of Leviticus is not necessarily a repetition of the general Sabbath commandment but is a part of the seven special sacred holidays. At the same time, he admits that the wording of the commandment to labour six days (v.3) does not really fit into the festival context. In his view, it was simply cited or appended according to the customary wording of the Sabbath commandments. Milgrom (2001: 1959) worked with the assumption that the Sabbath of

Leviticus 23:3 was the weekly Sabbath. Commenting on the phrase “a Sabbath of complete rest”, he said that the construct chain *shabbat shabbaton* is a superlative, literally meaning the most restful rest.

In Hartley’s view this day was so important to Israel that its observance is one of the Ten Commandments (1992: 376). Interestingly, Milgrom (2001: 1959) identified days that fell under the category of *shabbat shabbaton* as the Sabbath (Exod 31:15; 35:2; 16:23), the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:31; 23:32) and the Sabbatical year (Lev 25:4). Along similar lines as Hartley (1992), he went further to state that the Sabbath is the only holiday commanded in the Decalogue (Exod 20:8-11) and the only command grounded in creation (v. 11).

With the exception of Gerstenberger (1996), the scholars cited above identify the weekly Sabbath as the Sabbath of Leviticus 23:3 and as one of the days designated as the days of solemn rest. I agree with Hartley (1992) and Milgrom (2001) that the Sabbath being referred to in Leviticus 23:3 is the weekly Sabbath of creation which is reiterated in the Decalogue. The reason for taking this position is based on the similarity of the wording of the same commandment in Exodus 20:8-11; 31:15 and Deuteronomy 5:13-14.

Theologically, the Sabbath was supposed to be a day of rest and was designated “*a Sabbath to Yahweh*”, denoting that it was to be observed in honour of Yahweh (Isa 58:13-14) (Hartley, 1992: 376). The Sabbath in priestly writings is part of God’s creation and the day on which He rested (Gen 2:2-3). By right of ownership, it is “of YHWH” (Milgrom, 2001: 1962). The scholars cited here are correct in their opinion that the Sabbath was to be observed in honour of its Creator and Owner, Yahweh.

The fourth commandment, calling for the observance of the Sabbath, is very liberating because it frees all workers from daily toil to enjoy the results of their labour and the world God has created (Hartley, 1992: 376). On the Sabbath and *Yom Kippur*, Israelites and persons and animals under their control must rest, whereas during the sabbatical year not persons but the land must rest (Milgrom, 2001: 1959).

The consensus of the scholars cited is that the Sabbath was a symbol of human and environmental liberation. On the Sabbath day, humans rested from their daily toil while in the sabbatical year the land rested from human interference.

#### 4.3.6 The day of First Fruits (Leviticus 23:9-11)

Whereas Leviticus 23:3 calls people to the observance of the Sabbath, Leviticus 23:9-11 says:

*“The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath.”*”

This text is of interest because it is a discussion on what to do with the first fruits of the land. According to Hartley (1992: 385), during this ritual, the priest took the sheaf and elevated it to Yahweh in a gesture which symbolized the making of a present to Yahweh. Milgrom (2001: 1982), commenting on the clause “the land I am giving you”, says that this particular clause bears added force precisely because Yahweh has given to you this land, he is entitled to the first fruits of the soil. The gifts in Hartley’s view were gifts of praise to Yahweh for his blessings in terms of the fields (1992: 385).

The two emerging reasons behind the bringing of first fruits by Israel are that they constituted an acknowledgement by Israel that land is a gift from God. Secondly, gifts were a form of acknowledgement by Israel that God is the One who blessed the land in order for it to produce crops. If the ceremony of bringing the first fruits to the LORD was carefully observed, it remained as a constant reminder to Israel that her place in the land was assured if she maintained a good relationship with the Giver of the land, YHWH. The weekly Sabbath, the Sabbath year and the ceremony of bringing the first fruits to God were all an acknowledgement that YHWH is the Giver of land.

#### 4.3.7 The Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23-25)

Leviticus 23:23-25 *“The LORD said to Moses, Say to the Israelites: On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts. Do no regular work but present an offering made to the LORD by fire.”*

My interest in this text derives from the fact that it discusses a day of rest and in this respect is similar to the Sabbath Year. The text sets the first day of the seventh month as a high day on which no usual work was to be done (Hartley, 1992: 387 concurred by Milgrom, 2001: 2011). The seventh month, later called *Tishri*, encompassed the greatest consecration of

holidays (Gerstenberger, 1996: 347 concurred by Hartley, 1992: 387 and Milgrom, 2001: 2011).

The scholars cited agree that the first day of the seventh month was a solemn occasion on which no usual work was to be done.

Trumpets were sounded to mark important occasions in Israel (Hartley, 1992: 307). Rabbis viewed the *shophar* as an instrument of prayer - one that alerted God of Israel's needs (Milgrom, 2001: 2018). God gave Israel signs and rituals to use in order to move Him to act toward them graciously in terms of promises to the forefathers, especially the promises made to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) and in terms of the covenant (Hartley, 1992: 387).

Concerning the actual needs that must have prompted the Israelites to sound the trumpets on the first day of the seventh month, Gerstenberger (1996) noted: "The harvest of olives, fruit and grapes concluded one cycle of nature. The summer drought had dried out the land; the earth itself had given over its yield to human beings and thereby given them life. Now, however, it seemed exhausted to the point of death. The joy prompted by the successful harvest (Ps 65:14) is mixed with an apprehensive view toward the future (Ps 104:10-30). Will the New Year again bestow rain and blessing? The seventh month, situated in September - October, thus contains the germ of the new year" (1996:347).

Hartley (1992: 387) suggested that the memorial of the sounding of trumpets served to promote the continuance of the covenant relationship. Memory, he argued, is a vital means for both parties of a covenant to keep the covenant relationship alive. Milgrom (2001: 2018) argued that all three festivals of the seventh month combined into a single-minded goal, to beseech God for adequate and timely rain in the forthcoming agricultural year.

I think the purpose of the celebration of the first day of the seventh month, though not explicitly stated, must have had a dual concern - the concern to pray for rains as suggested by Gerstenberger (1996: 347) and Milgrom (2001: 2018) and the concern for the renewal of the covenant with YHWH as suggested by Hartley (1992). This day portrays God as Provider and also as a God who values His covenant with His people Israel. I see this day as sharing the same theological purpose as the Sabbath Year, to point to God as Provider. On the first day of the seventh month God is celebrated as the Provider of rains and crops, while in the fallow Year, God is portrayed as Provider of food to Israel.

#### **4.3.8 Jubilee Law (Leviticus 25:8-55)**

The year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8-54) forms the immediate context of the Sabbath year (Lev 25:1-7) in Leviticus 25. The Jubilee discussion is covered in Leviticus 25:8-54 and in this dissertation I will cover all of these verses since they constitute a unified whole discussing one theme: the Jubilee. This section is of interest because it deals with a year's holiday, the Jubilee. The Jubilee itself is similar to the Sabbath year in that it addresses issues of land and family that are very relevant to our major topic of discussion in this thesis. This section (Lev 25:8-54) is also of interest to us since it forms the immediate context of the Fallow Year (Lev 25:2-7).

Leviticus 25:8-54 is structured in the following way in my discussion:

4.3.8.1 Timing and general provisions (Leviticus 25:8-13)

4.3.8.2 Buying and selling of land (Leviticus 25:14-17)

4.3.8.3 Blessings due to the observance of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:18-22)

4.3.8.4 Redemption of property and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:23-28)

4.3.8.5 Redemption of houses in walled cities and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:29-31)

4.3.8.6 Land belonging to the Levites and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:32-34)

4.3.8.7 Helping the poor (Leviticus 25:35-38)

4.3.8.8 Israelite servants and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:39-43)

4.3.8.9 Laws concerning holding of slaves (Leviticus 25:44-46)

4.3.8.10 Redemption of Israelite slaves (Leviticus 25:47-55)

4.3.8.11 Retention of land by Israel as a nation (Leviticus 26:1-5)

4.4 CONCLUSION

#### 4.3.8.1 Timing and general provisions (Leviticus 25:8-13)

Leviticus 25:8-13 “Count off seven Sabbaths of years – seven times seven years so that there are seven Sabbaths of years amounting to a period of forty nine years. Then have the trumpet (shopfar) sounded everywhere on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), sound the trumpet (shopfar) throughout your land (eres). Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty (deror) throughout the land (’eres) to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property (ahuzah) and each to his own clan (mishpaheto). The fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee (yobel) for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself, or harvest the untended vines. For it is a Jubilee (yobel) and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields (sadeh). In this year of Jubilee, everyone is to return to his property (ahuzzato).”

Seven is a most sacred number. Therefore, seven times seven is even more sacred. The forty-ninth year is a sabbatical year and its greater sacredness is celebrated in the fiftieth year called the year of Jubilee (*yobel*) (Hartley, 1992: 377). According to Gerstenberger (1996: 377), a period of forty-nine years was to be counted off in the style of a festival calendar that securely connected important annual date with one another (Lev 23:15; Deut 16:9). Here the basic unit of seven years, a week of years, is treated like a week of days. According to Milgrom (2001: 2163) the period of the Jubilee cycle (49+1 years) was based on the pentecontad calendar, the fifty days (49+1) between the barley and the wheat offerings (Lev 23:15-16).

The general consensus on the timing of the Jubilee year is that it occurred after seven weeks of years. Its sanctity was celebrated in the fiftieth year. The Jubilee structural cycle was patterned after the pentecontad calendar.

The year of Jubilee (*yobel*) was heralded by the sounding of a ram’s horn (*shofar*) throughout the land (’eres) on the Day of Atonement as the nation’s sins were cleansed (Hartley, 1992: 434 concurred by Milgrom, 2002: 2163).

There is unanimity among the scholars cited that the onset of the Jubilee was signalled by blowing a ram’s horn throughout the land and that the actual day this occurred was the Day



of Atonement. One can similarly note that the timing and manner in which the Jubilee was heralded suggests that it was a public, universal and most sacred event.

Leviticus 25:10 “*Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty (dérór) throughout the land (eres) to all its inhabitants.*”

The expression liberty (*dérór*), meaning “freeing, release,” is a loanword from Akkadian and the Old Testament uses it specifically in later texts to refer to return of land (Ezek 46:17) and to the release of slaves (Jer 34; Isa 61:1) (Gerstenberger, 1996: 378). The Sumerian equivalent of release is *amargi*, which means to return to the mother and fits precisely the Leviticus definition of *dérór* (return to one’s holding or return to one’s kin) (Milgrom, 2001: 2167). The two scholars cited above, both point to the fact that this expression has something to do with the concept of returning of one to his land.

In substance, the Israelite institution of “free year” was related to those particular amnesties and remission of debt occasionally proclaimed by the highest governmental authorities in the monarchies of the ancient Orient, often at the occasion of throne accession or thanksgiving vows (Gerstenberger 1996:378). Milgrom (2001:2169) on the other hand rightly contended that in sharp contrast with all ancient Near Eastern release proclamations (*misarum/anduraru*), the biblical Jubilee was cyclical, ordained by God and not by an earthly monarch according to his whim or need and could not be revoked or circumvented. Furthermore whereas the Mesopotamian *anduraru/ misarum* affected certain districts and subjects the *dérór* was universal.

Leviticus 25:10b “*It shall be a Jubilee (yobel) for you; each one of you is to return to his family property (ahuzzato) and each to his own clan.*”

In the year of Jubilee each person returned to his ancestral holding (*ahuzah*) (Milgrom, 2001: 2169). The release (*dérór*) in Gerstenberger’s opinion had to be comprehensive and included the return of real estate and the release of debt slaves (1996: 378). Andrew Shead (2002: 21) and Hartley (1992: 434) concurred.

The general consensus of the scholars cited above is that the year of Jubilee granted Israelites and Jews release which entailed a return to the land of their patrimony, among other things. The God portrayed here in my view is a God who is sovereign over time and He uses time to better the plight of ailing humanity. In the year of Jubilee He restored human beings rendered

homeless by poverty to their land of patrimony. He is, as it were, a God of new beginnings and was keen to see to it that families retained their land of heritage.

In the year of Jubilee, the instruction given in connection with agricultural activities was “do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a Jubilee and is to be holy for you - eat only what is taken directly from the fields (*sadeh*)” (Lev 25:11-12).

All instructions regarding sowing and harvesting for the Sabbatical year (Lev 25:2-7) apply to the year of Jubilee (Hartley, 1992: 434). The purpose of emphasizing the sanctity of the Jubilee is to associate it with the Sabbath (Exod 35:2), particularly the work prohibition of the Sabbatical year (4a-5b with verse 11), but at the same time to refrain from using the term Sabbath because of the dissimilarity between these two institutions (Milgrom, 2001: 2170).

These institutions have similar restrictions and they are similar in sanctity. Some scholars like Gerstenberger (1996: 379) go a bit further - even to the point of suggesting that perhaps the Sabbath year and the Jubilee occurred in the same year.

Gerstenberger (1996: 379) expressed reservations concerning the provisioning of food for the people during the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee (*yobel*) if there was no sowing and reaping in these years. Milgrom (2001: 2176) on the other hand said that the purpose of the clause “it is a Jubilee” (Lev 25:12) is to stress that the after-growth may be eaten if it is taken directly from the fields (*sadeh*), not that the farmer was to store it in his house. The year of Jubilee (*yobel*) is declared to be holy and the permissibility of eating freely from the produce that grows that year is repeated for emphasis (Hartley, 1992: 434).

The scholars cited above, with the exception of Gerstenberger (1996), are all of the opinion that people were supposed to feed on the usufruct of the land in the Sabbath year and in the year of Jubilee. This concept not only helps one to see God restoring the land’s fertility through giving it rest from agricultural activity but it also helps one to see God giving His people security in the land by providing them with food.

#### 4.3.8.2 Buying and selling of land (Leviticus 25: 14-17)

Leviticus 25:14-17 spells out the law of buying and selling of land as follows: *“If you sell land to one of your countrymen, or buy any from him, do not take advantage of each other, you are to buy from your countrymen on the basis of the number of years left from harvesting crops. When the years are many, you are to increase the price, and when the years are few, you are to decrease the price; because what he is really selling to you is the number of crops. Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD your God.”*

The Hebrew word *timkeru* for “sell” implies the concept of lease (Milgrom, 2001: 2177). Land was actually not supposed to be bought or sold, but was to be leased for the period of time until the next Jubilee (Hartley, 1996: 379). Leviticus 25:13-18 is a passage addressing a question involving the year of release and its unspoken point of departure is the inviolability of family property and the reality of distress sales (Gerstenberger, 1996: 379). In a transaction involving redeemable land, the seller might buy it back at the price of the sale less the value of the harvests that have passed (Hartley: 1996: 436). Gerstenberger (1996: 380) went on to make the following conclusion: “When real estate changed hands, it did so only through a temporary contract guaranteeing the purchaser use of the property at most only until the next year of release. Under no circumstances would the purchased field become the inherited possession of the purchaser’s family. This is why the purchase was more of a kind of rent figured out according to the length of use” (1996:380).

What is clearly emerging in the laws concerning the buying and selling of land is that land could only be rented out but never sold away outright. This position agrees with the text’s requirement that said land could not be bought but could be rented out for a number of crop years. This law then ensured that land remained in the hands of the family.

Leviticus 25:17 *“Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God, I am the LORD your God.”*

The exhortation not to take advantage of each other is repeated from verse 14b and is grounded on the cornerstone of Israelite faith, namely each person’s fear of his God (Hartley, 1992: 437). In reality, this paragraph focused on distress sales in which the creditor had more leverage and God called on the creditor in this position to recall the basic social rule of the people of God ‘you shall not exploit each other’ (Gerstenberger, 1996: 381). The rationale cited for an ethical humane response was the fear of God (Milgrom, 2001: 2179). In fearing

God, one places far greater value on personal relationships than on personal gain and this begins with a personal relationship with God (Hartley, 1992: 437).

I agree with the concept noted by the scholars cited that the fear of God in this text is what governed people's lives even in doing business.

From an ethical point of view it was established that Israelites, in dealing with one another in the sale of property, were supposed to operate in terms of the fear of God. They had to consider their relationship with God above material gains they would make by profiteering deals they engaged in as they traded with one another. Hence, the exchange of real estate was viewed as something not happening just between two parties in the buying and selling process. God Himself was also present and interested in how the exercise was conducted. This obviously was supposed to influence the ethical road the buyers and sellers, creditors and debtors were supposed to follow as they did business. Coming to land, the presence of God acted as a deterrent to those who sought to exploit their poor brothers by swindling land out of them permanently during distress sales.

The God portrayed here is a God of social and economic justice and promotes just scales in trade. He is also a God who desires His presence to be acknowledged by His people when they are doing business with one another.

#### **4.3.8.3 Blessings due to the observance of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25: 18-22)**

Leviticus 25:18-22 *“Follow my decrees and be careful to follow my laws, and you will live safely in the land (’eres). Then the land (’eres) will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live there in safety. You may ask, what will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops? I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land (’eres) will yield enough for three years. While you plant during the eighth year, you will eat from the old crop and will continue to eat from it until the harvest of the ninth year comes in.”*

Leviticus 25:18 puts forth the following condition *“Follow my decrees and be careful to obey my laws and you will live safely in the land (’eres).”*

This condition according to Milgrom (2001: 2179) pointed to the security Israel would experience in the land from her enemies if she did her part in abiding by this divine condition. The exhortation is underlined with the promises that Israel would dwell securely in the land

stated twice for impact, and that they would have enough food to eat to satisfaction (Hartley, 1992: 437). It is illuminating further to understand that the major crops frequently indicated in Scripture are grains, wine and oil which have a long lifespan if well stocked (Milgrom, 2001: 2181). In the sixth year God promised to give Israel an abundance of harvest (Hartley, 1992: 437). Although *peri* (fruit) is normally used with reference to trees it can also denote produce (Milgrom, 2001: 2179). YHWH was determined to give the people an abundant harvest and the old produce would be sufficient to be eaten for parts of the three years reaching into the ninth year until the crop of the New Year was harvested (Hartley, 1992: 437).

The scholars cited above all agree that God would bless Israel by causing the land to produce abundance of crops in the sixth year to take care of the people's needs during the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee. YHWH further promised that He would protect His people from marauding bands of enemies that plundered crops during the harvest. In short, the blessings YHWH promised to send to Israel if she kept the covenant of God and kept His laws, included military and economic security, and high agricultural production from the land leading to abundance of food for the people.

These insights portray to us a God who is a Protector God and a Provider God. He is a God who would protect the loss of land by Israel through her enemies. He would also sustain Israel in the land by providing her with adequate food.

According to Hartley (1992: 437), the speaker in verse 20 directly addresses the people's question of what they will eat in the seventh year - the fallow year. It is debated whether this three year period applies to the Sabbatical year in the Jubilee cycle which seems to require two consecutive fallow years - years seven and eight plus the ninth year waiting for harvest. Meyer (2005: 128) noted that the question in verse 20 expresses a fear that seems to be in tension with what we already had in vv. 6 and 7, namely "what will we eat in the seventh year? There it was already stated that all the different groups in the society would eat and harvest in the Sabbath year. It would actually have made more sense to ask: "what will we eat in the eighth year?" If they did not sow in the seventh year there would not have been a problem until the eighth. The answer given was in the form of a promise of adequate food to meet the needs of food for three years.

Whether the seventh year addressed was the one to do with the Sabbath year or the year of Jubilee is not quite clear because in both institutions the number seven was involved. I am of the opinion the seventh year in discussion is one to do with the year of Jubilee. God promised that He would provide food for the seventh year (regular fallow) and the eighth year (Jubilee fallow) and even the ninth year when planting and harvesting resumed.

#### **4.3.8.4 Redemption of property and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:23-28)**

Leviticus 25:23-24 “*The land (‘eres) must not be sold permanently, because the land (‘eres) is mine and you are but tenants. Throughout the country (‘eres) you hold as a possession (ahuzzatkhem), you must provide for redemption (ge’ulah) of land (‘eres).*”

A family’s land (‘eres) was not supposed to be sold in perpetuity because the entire land belonged to God and for that reason His adherents could enjoy the status of aliens and tenants (*gerim watovasib*) (Gerstenberger, 1996: 382). The Hebrew phrase *lo timmakar* (must not be sold) is an apodictic and permanent prohibition meant to remind the buyer that his ownership of the land (*aretz*) did not extend beyond the Jubilee (Milgrom, 2001: 2183).

Inherent to the principle of each family’s right to occupy their inheritance stood the theology that God Himself held title to the land (‘eres) (Hartley, 1992: 437). Given by God, property (*ahuzzah*) was only revocable by God (Milgrom, 2001: 2185). YHWH was the mighty Saviour and Leader of His people, to whom Israel owed everything, including the land (‘eres) on which they dwelt (Gerstenberger, 1996: 388).

From a theological point of view, what I have just established is that land (‘eres) belonged to YHWH and YHWH rented it out to Israel and He decreed that land (‘eres) was not supposed to be sold on a permanent basis. More than that, He instituted the law of Jubilee to ensure that those who had lost their land (‘eres) reverted to it at this special time. Israel as a people was to regard themselves as aliens and tenants (*gerim watovasib*) of YHWH. This to me suggests the concept of stewardship where Israel entered into a relationship with God. Avoiding the autonomous concept of ownership to anything, Israel had to recognize that ultimate ownership of land (‘eres) rested with God whilst they were aliens and tenants (*gerim watovasib*) managing God’s land (‘eres). Israel was supposed to manage land (‘eres) with a sense of accountability both at the national level and at family level.

Leviticus 25:24 *“Throughout the land (’eres) you hold as a possession (ahuzah), you must provide for the redemption (ge’ulah) of land (’eres).”*

Leviticus 25:24 insures redemption for all mortgaged land (*ahuzah*) (Gerstenberger, 1996: 383). *Ge’ulah*, the Hebrew word for redemption does not refer here to the automatic release of the land (*’eres*) at the Jubilee year but to monetary redemption during the period between Jubilees (Milgrom, 2001: 2188-9). God declared that every property (*ahuzah*) held by families (*mishpaheto*) of Israel as an inheritance (*nahala*) given to them under covenant, carried a right of redemption and no loopholes were to be devised to circumvent the intention of this law (Hartley, 1992: 438).

The man whose property (*ahuzah*) was to be redeemed had become economically insolvent (Gerstenberger, 1996: 383), concurred by Hartley (1992: 438). At this stage a man had forfeited not only his land (*’eres*) but also its usufruct (Milgrom, 2001: 2192). As soon as a person was in this kind of distress the family’s own solidarity came into play (Gerstenberger, 1996: 383).

A kinsman redeemer (*go’el*) stepped forth; purchased back the land (*’eres*) forfeited by a relative and held that land (*’eres*) until the year of Jubilee (*yobel*) when it would revert to its actual owner (Hartley, 1992: 438; Milgrom, 2001: 2192).

One can conclude that what the institution of redemption (*ge’ulah*) checked was loss of land (*’eres*) from the clan (*mishpaheto*) and what the Jubilee (*yobel*) achieved was restoring of land (*’eres*) to its actual owner.

Leviticus 25:26-28 addresses the issue of someone who had no kinsman to redeem his land: *“If, however a man has no one to redeem (ga’al) it for him but he himself prospers and acquires sufficient means to redeem it, he is to determine the value of the years since he sold it and refund the balance to the man whom he sold it; he can then go back to his own property (ahuzah). But if he does not acquire the means to repay him what he sold will remain in the possession of the buyer until the year of Jubilee (yobel). It will be returned in the Jubilee (yobel), and he can go back to his own property (ahuzah).”*

The person who leased out his patrimony retained the right of repossession of his inheritance by paying the indebtedness if he managed to prosper after selling the land (*’eres*) (Hartley,

1992: 439). He was not to acquire only part of the sold land because his redemption of necessity resulted in the return of the owner's entire estate (*ahuzah*) (Milgrom, 2001: 2197).

Possibly this man prospered because he had a bumper crop on the land (*'eres*) that remained under his control, or he saved wages from working as a hired labourer or he might have received a fortune bequeathed him as an inheritance (Hartley, 1992: 439). This was a clear case of deliverance achieved by pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps (Gerstenberger, 1996: 439). According to the correct observation by Milgrom (2001: 2197) the computation was to be made as to how many crop years had elapsed since the sale. The original price the owner had received was to be received reduced by the number of harvest years from the land since its lease (Hartley, 1992: 439).

The scholars cited indicate that if a person somehow had no one to redeem his land, he still owned the right of redemption to his property if he prospered. He was to personally pay for the amount of sale less the harvest years the buyer had used it. If however the owner was not able to accumulate enough money to repurchase his land (*'eres*) it was returned to him in the year of Jubilee (*yobel*) (Hartley, 1996: 439).

The passage portrays a God who encouraged individual initiative and a "never say die" attitude. He is also a God whose options in executing deliverance for his people are not limited. Ultimately, in God's plans, He always achieved his goal- that all families (*mishpaheto*) remain on their land of patrimony (*ahuzah*) either through the vehicle of a kinsman redeemer (*go'el*), through an individual's personal drive and initiative, or through the plan of the year of Jubilee. He is a God who was determined to see his people settled in their land (*'eres*).

Inherent to the principle of each family's right to occupy their inheritance (*nahala*) stood the theology that God Himself held title to the land (*'eres*) (Hartley, 1992: 437). The Israelites received their property (*ahuzah*) by lot (Num 33:50-56) from God and given by God, that property (*ahuzah*) was only revocable by God (Milgrom, 2001: 2185).



#### 4.3.8.5 Redemption of houses in walled cities and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:29-31)

Leviticus 25:29-31 *“If a man sells a house in a walled city, he retains the right of redemption (ge’ulah) a full year after its sale. During that time he may redeem it. If it is not redeemed after a full year is passed, the house in the walled city shall belong permanently to the buyer and his descendants. It is not to be returned in the Jubilee (yobel). But houses in villages without walls around them are to be considered as open country. They can be redeemed and they are to be returned in the Jubilee (yobel).”*

After a house in the city had been sold, it could be redeemed in the year immediately after its sale (Hartley, 1992: 439). Different laws applied to urban properties than to agricultural land and after a period of one year, the house in the city and the land were irretrievably lost for the debtor (Gerstenberger, 1996: 385).

The text states clearly that if a man sold a house in a walled city, he retained the right of redemption for one year, as cited by the scholars.

The theological grounds for the ordinance regarding ownership no longer has any significance in the urban culture since private ownership here supersedes Yahweh’s law (Gerstenberger, 1996: 385). In these larger cities the population was racially mixed and the populace did not live off the land (Hartley, 1992: 439). Milgrom (2001: 2198) contended that walled towns, typical of Canaanite culture, were a novelty to the Israelite farming population and their customary family law did not provide for them. A house in such a town was considered more an individual than a family possession.

Canaanites and other resident aliens who lived in the cities were not covered by land inheritance laws of Israel. This exception thus gave them the right to buy and sell houses in Israel’s walled cities (Hartley, 1992: 439).

What I have established is that the laws governing the redemption of houses in walled cities differed from those governing the houses in the country. Houses in walled cities could only be redeemed in a period of one year after the sale. After the period of one year the house became the property of the buyer on a permanent basis. The reason why there were separate legislations for houses in walled cities has been suggested as to do with Canaanite customs. Since this suggestion is not explicitly given in the text one cannot say for certain this was the

reason YHWH gave the separate regulations for houses in walled cities. I prefer to consider it as a suggestion open for debate.

Theologically, the fact that God gave a ruling at all on the conditions surrounding the redemption of houses in the cities, points to God as a God whose rule covers all domains of human habitation. He rules the countryside and He rules the metropolis. The rules may be different but the fact of His rule is a universal reality. Actually, the fact the God gave different laws for redemption of houses in the cities from those in the country points to Him as a God of contextual relevance.

With regards to the maintenance of land within the family, the ruling that the period in which the redemption of a house in a walled city was to be executed was just one year, warned those who intended to sell their city houses to consider whether they wanted to risk loss of their houses forever or not. Such considerations led to intelligent well-calculated decisions. In reality there were only two options. Option one said: sell your house in a walled city, redeem it in one year and it would remain yours forever. The second option said, sell your house in a walled city, fail to redeem it within one year and lose it forever.

God in divine wisdom gave different rulings for buying, selling and redeeming of properties in walled cities from those in the countryside. Both plans had one goal in common, the goal of keeping land within the family.

#### **4.3.8.6 Land belonging to the Levites and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:32-34)**

Leviticus 25:32 <i>“The Levites always have the right to redeem their houses in the Levitical towns which they possess.”</i>
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According to Milgrom (2001: 2201) the houses in the assigned Levitical cities were always subject to the laws of redemption and Jubilee. He went on to say that their homes were juridically equivalent to the Israelites' fields. Had the Levites been allowed to sell their own houses with no guarantee of ultimate redemption in the Jubilee, the Levites could have found themselves with no homes of their own at all (Wenham, 1979: 321).

The general consensus of the scholars cited above is that Levitical houses in cities were redeemable unlike other urban dwellings. This position agrees with the text's message.

Leviticus 25:33 *“So the property of the Levites is redeemable – that is, a house sold in any town they hold, and is to be returned in the Jubilee, because the houses in the towns of the Levites are their property among the Israelites.”*

Since the task of the Levites was to serve the people at the sanctuary and to teach them the Law, they were not to be involved with farming and shepherding and their houses constituted their primary possession and the laws of redemption applied to them (Hartley, 1992: 440). Levine (1989: 177) and Milgrom (2001: 2203) concurred. This law ensured that Levitical ‘land’ also remained within the family.

The emerging trend here is that houses in Levitical cities were to be considered as their agricultural land and they were redeemable in the year of Jubilee.

Leviticus 25: 34 *“But the pasture land belonging to their towns must not be sold; it is their permanent possession.”*

According to Levine (1989: 177), the term translated unenclosed land (*migrash*) originally designated an area for livestock. According to Hartley (1992: 439) *migrash* referred to pasture land which was not supposed to be sold because it constituted an individual possession. Levine (1989: 177) noted that such areas were not to be sold under any circumstances, no matter how severe the economic situation of the Levites. Gerstenberger (1996: 386) noted that once priestly ownership of land was allowed, their properties generally became holy land removed from normal economic activity. Milgrom (2001: 2204) concurred.

The emerging trends here are that pasturelands belonging to Levites were their enduring possession and were not supposed to be sold whatever the circumstances.

#### **4.3.8.7 Helping the poor (Leviticus 25:35-38)**

Leviticus 25:35 *“If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so that he can continue to live among you.”*

Levine (1989: 178) says that the person described as poor here is one who lost his means and became indebted. Whenever a brother needed money, a member of the community was supposed to support him (Hartley, 1992: 440). Gerstenberger (1996: 386) noted that the

relative in question here was not only a clan member, but also one's fellow in faith. He went on to point out that the entire verse describes a situation of economic insolvency.

According to Milgrom (2001: 2207), this text is a warning to the creditor not to treat the debtor as a resident alien, a person who in the case of default could be seized as a slave. Israelites were supposed to be as generous to members of their own family who were in need as they were to aliens (Wenham, 1979: 321). By encouraging Israelites to treat their indebted brothers as they treated an alien (*ger*) this pointed to a positive spirit, not a negative one (Meyer, 2005: 134). This law actually shows that one is not to be generous to a foreigner and shut up his compassion toward his fellow kinsman who is in poverty (Hartley, 1992: 440).

Emerging in the discussion is the concept that says in Israel, aliens (*ger*) were given compassionate hospitable treatment when they were in need. The instruction of Leviticus 25:35 is that the Israelites were supposed to treat their fellow Israelites who were in need in like manner.

The focus will now be on the last part of Leviticus 25:35, "*let him live by your side.*"

This phrase means that if the family steps in to help, the man who has sold his land may not have the further disgrace of slavery imposed on him (Wenham, 1979: 321). According to Levine (1989: 178), this phrase could be taken to mean that the person involved might not be evicted from his land but must be allowed to continue to reside at one's side as a member of the community. According to Milgrom (2001: 2209), this statement meant that some form of subservience was intended in the relation of a debtor to a creditor.

With the exception of Milgrom (2001: 2209), the consensus of the scholars cited points to the fact that Israelites were supposed to do all in their power to assist a brother who had fallen into debt so that he might not fall so low that at the end of the day he might be evicted from his land or be forced to work as a slave. I agree with the consensus position. Milgrom's position that some form of subservience was meant, is also plausible in view of the fact that one of the possible ways in which one could help a person who was poor without reducing him to a slave was by employing him as a hired worker (2001: 2209).

Leviticus 25:36 "*Do not take interest (neshech) of any kind from him, but fear your God, so that your countrymen may continue to live among you.*"

Gerstenberger (1996: 387) dismissed the prohibition against taking interest as an empty utopia or a cry of despair from those people who, because of their faith in God could not bear to see the impoverishment of their brothers. Milgrom (2001: 2209) on the other hand noted that from all biblical sources, it is clear that interest from an Israelite is prohibited and even condemned. Interest free loans are well attested in ancient financial records, and laws against taking excessive interest are also known, but Israel is alone in totally prohibiting interest payments to the poor (Wenham, 1979: 321-2).

Literally, the Hebrew *neshech* (interest) means “a bite”, and *tarbit*, its other equivalent means “profit” on a loan (Levine, 1989: 178). The issue was that no fellow Israelite was to profit from a brother’s need for financial assistance and was not supposed to charge interest (*neshech*) or (*tarbit*) on a loan of seed or food (Exod 22:24-5, Deut 23:20-21) (Hartley, 1992: 440).

With the exception of Gerstenberger (1996), the consensus of scholars just cited is that the exercise of charging interest by Israelites to their fellow Israelites was strictly prohibited. I see this Law as a Law that could be executed in practical life if the people concerned valued their close link as brothers. The law against charging interest obviously worked in favour of the maintenance of land within the family since it arrested the rate at which an indebted person could slide into poverty.

The phrase that follows the one prohibiting the charging of interest is a theological one and it says “but fear your God, so that your countrymen may continue to live among you” (Lev 25:36). I will discuss this statement along with the contents of Leviticus 25:38 which also is a theological text that reads “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.”

God’s generosity to His people is an example to them on how they should treat each other (Wenham, 1997: 322). The prohibition of charging interest was supported by the basic premise of biblical faith, the fear of God (Hartley, 1992: 440). The God who gave the Israelites land of their own and freed them from the servitude of Egypt now commands them, in turn, to prevent conditions of servitude among their own people (Levine, 1989: 178). Devotion to God motivated the faithful to express compassion toward others, whether they are successful or poor (Hartley, 1992: 440). In Milgrom’s view, the taking of interest was not

just an illegal matter unenforceable by man, but an immoral issue punishable by God (2001: 2212).

The consensus of the scholars cited is that Israel was supposed to be motivated by the fear of God and an imitation ethic in dealing with one another. The Israelites were supposed to remember the way YHWH delivered them from Egypt and they were supposed to extend the same redemptive deliverance to their own needy brothers. If the Israelites were faithful and if they had fear of their God, they would have abandoned all practices that led to impoverishment of their brothers - a condition that led to eventual loss of all forms of property including land. For this reason, I think the law prohibiting the charging of interest was an effective measure in preventing loss of land from families.

#### **4.3.8.8 Israelite servants and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:39-43)**

Leviticus 25:39 *“If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave.”*

The *ah* (brother) in trouble and the addressee are here portrayed as having interdependent fates and the position of the poor brother has become precarious because he is not seeking for help. He is actually sold to the addressee (Meyer, 2005: 136). Beset by poor harvests, plagues and difficult circumstances, a brother might become so poor (*muk*) that he had to sell himself in servitude to another person (Hartley, 1992: 440). Such an Israelite, indentured to another was not supposed to be treated as a slave (Levine, 1989: 179). Gerstenberger (1996: 389) said that the only thing clear here is the intention to protect the person condemned to debt slavery as much as possible from the arbitrary will of his master.

According to Milgrom (2001: 2212) an Israelite debtor did not assume the status of a slave but of a resident hireling - he received wages to pay off his debt. Hartley (1992: 441) concurred. The Israelite debtor was supposed to be granted release in the Jubilee year (Levine, 1989: 179; Meyer, 2005: 136).

The consensus of the scholars cited above is that in the event that an Israelite got enslaved, he was not supposed to be treated like a slave. His humanity was to be respected and he was not supposed to be exposed to degrading and dehumanizing treatment meant for slaves. He was supposed to be treated with dignity and to be assured of his release in the Jubilee year.

Leviticus 25:40 *“He was to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the year of Jubilee.”*

The legal status of the indentured Israelite was that of an employee (Levine, 1989: 179). According to Hartley (1992: 441), if someone was hired as a servant, it did not mean that he would receive regular wages, though he might receive some remuneration in addition to shelter and food. However, it did mean that he would be treated with the respect shown to a hired worker and his tasks would be similar to those of a hired worker. Such a person would be released in the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:40b). The resident hireling lived with his family on the landowner's property (Milgrom, 2001: 2221).

I think the indentured Israelite was given the treatment of an employee, a concept which I think agrees with the ‘hired worker’ status.

Leviticus 25:41 *“then he and his children are to be released, and he will go back to his own clan and to the property of his forefathers.”*

The word *yatsa*, “to depart” connotes release, freedom (Levine, 1989: 179). The Israelite slave was to work until the year of Jubilee and then he and his entire family were to return to *mishpaha* (his clan) and *ahuzat abuton* (his ancestral possession) (Hartley, 1992: 441; Levine, 1989: 179).

Leviticus 25:42-43 *“Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.”*

God acquired the Israelites as His “slaves,” by redeeming them from Egyptian bondage and His claim had priority (Levine, 1989: 179). Hartley (1992: 441) and Milgrom (1996: 2227) concurred.

The scholars cited agree that when Israelites were redeemed by God from Egypt, they became the slaves of YHWH. On that account, they were not supposed to subject each other to slavery. The motivation for this law was first of all the remembrance that Israelites were once slaves in Egypt and secondly that all Israelites were now slaves of YHWH. On this account, no Israelite was supposed to be sold into perpetual slavery.

The root *frk* means, “grind down” and “crush, break in pieces, rub off” and used with a slave it described toil that breaks the body and grinds down the spirit (Hartley, 1992: 441). This

idiom evokes the Egyptian bondage: “the Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites with the various labours that they made them to perform” (Exod 1:13-14) (Levine, 1989: 179). Harshness characterized slavery in Egypt (Exod 1:13-14) (Wenham, 1989: 322). The counsel here was that what the Egyptians did to the Israelites, Israelites were not supposed to do to one another (Levine, 1989: 179). Milgrom (2001: 2227) and (Gerstenberger 1996: 389) concurred.

The appeal to follow this standard is the master’s fear (*yara*) of God (Hartley, 1992: 441). The fear of God was supposed to assure compliance with His commandments in this regard (Levine, 1989: 179).

In summary, the Israelites were supposed to treat other Israelite slaves with love and care and the motivation behind this treatment was the fear of God.

#### **4.3.8.9 Laws concerning the holding of slaves (Leviticus 25:44-46)**

Leviticus 25:44-46 *“Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves, you may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans, born in your country, and they will become your property.”*

Israelites were permitted to own slaves, both male and female and such slaves were to be purchased from the surrounding nations, from resident aliens in Israel, and even from aliens that had been born in Israel (Hartley, 1992: 441). Levine (1989:179) Gerstenberger (1996: 390) and Milgrom (2001: 2229) concurred.

The general consensus here is that Israelites were allowed by God to hold slaves. The slaves were to be acquired from neighbouring nations. Such slaves were regarded as family property (*ahuzah*) and were handed down from father to son as part of the family’s inheritance.

#### **4.3.8.10 Redemption of Israelite slaves (Leviticus 25:47-55)**

Leviticus 25:47-48a *“If an alien or a temporary resident among you becomes rich and one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells himself to the alien living among you or to a member of the aliens’ clan, he retains the right of redemption after he has sold himself.”*



If an Israelite sold himself to a non-Israelite, that situation did not necessarily set aside his right of redemption (*ge'ula*) (Hartley, 1992: 441). The purchase of an Israelite slave amounted to a terminal lease (Milgrom, 2001: 2239). The clan of the Israelite indentured to a non-Israelite bore the responsibility for redeeming their kinsman (Levine, 1989: 180).

The emerging consensus here is that if it happened that an Israelite became enslaved to a foreigner, the understanding was that he still had the right of redemption. No foreigner could hold an Israelite slave in perpetuity. The relatives of a man indentured to a foreigner had an obligation to redeem him.

Leviticus 25:48b-49 *“One of his relatives may redeem him: An uncle or cousin or any blood relative in his clan may redeem him. Or if he prospers he may redeem himself.”*

The order of obligation to redeem kinsman within the clan correlated in a general way, with the law of inheritance set forth in the account of Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 27:8-11 where first came brothers, then uncles and cousins then other general relatives (Levine, 1989: 180). Hartley (1992: 442) and Gerstenberger (1996: 391-2) concurred.

The general consensus is that the one who extended the right of redemption was a close relative or a member of the clan. If the kin solidarity worked well in times of crisis, no Israelite could either lose his/her freedom or land because of poverty.

A debtor servant also retained the right to purchase his own freedom (Hartley, 1992: 442). The debtor might also serve as his own redeemer (Meyer, 2005: 141).

Leviticus 25:50-52: *“He and his buyer are to count the years from the time he sold himself up to the year of Jubilee. The price of his release is to be based on the rate paid to a hired man for that number of years. If many years remain, he must pay for his redemption a larger share of the price paid for him. If only a few years remain until the year of Jubilee, he is to compute that and pay for his redemption accordingly.”*

The computation of the amount to be paid in redeeming a poor brother is stated here in terms of wages instead of crop years (Levine, 1989: 181). The price of a servant's redemption was to be determined on the basis of the wages of a hired worker according to the length of time until the next Jubilee (Hartley, 1992: 442). Meyer (2005: 142) concurred.

The general consensus is that the redemption price of a slave was computed according to the number of years remaining until the year of Jubilee.

Leviticus 25:53 *“He is to be treated as a man hired from year to year; you must see to it that his owner does not rule over him ruthlessly.”*

A foreign master was supposed to treat his Israelite servant as a hired hand: he was not supposed to treat him harshly (*bafarak*) (Hartley, 1992: 442). According to Meyer (2005: 142), the Israelites would not allow the foreigner (*ger*) or alien (*tosab*) to mistreat an Israelite servant in their eyes. Levine (1989) similarly argued: “The law to redeem an Israelite relative indentured to a non-Israelite is exceptional. To allow a fellow Israelite to remain indentured to a gentile would be cruel humiliation; and one was not supposed to remain indifferent in such a situation, which could lead to forfeiture of land mortgaged to debts and its seizure by non-Israelites”(1989:181).

The two opinions emerging here are that this text is saying that gentile masters were called upon to treat Israelite slaves with respect. The second opinion is that this text is saying that Israelites were not supposed to countenance a situation where a fellow Israelite served as a slave to a gentile master.

I object to the first opinion because the addressee of the message of Leviticus was not the gentile, but the Israelites. I agree with the second opinion because it correctly works with the assumption that the addressee of the message are the Israelites who are being urged to do something about the plight of their poor brother at the hands of gentiles. Meyer (2005:142) in supporting this view also said the real claim made on the addressee (Israelites) is to check up on the brother in the hands of the foreigner to make sure that he is not being treated badly. This means essentially that each Israelite was to have the welfare of other Israelites at heart and be out to prevent pain and suffering of each Israelite.

Leviticus 25:54-55a *“Even if he is not redeemed in any of these ways, he and his children are to be released in the year of Jubilee, for the Israelites belong to one as servants.”*

If a debtor-slave had not been redeemed (*ga'al*) by any of the ways provided for him to gain his freedom, he went out (*yatsa*) in the year of Jubilee (Hartley, 1992: 442). Levine (1989: 181) concurred. Kinsler (1999: 3396) notes that the fundamental foundation for the Jubilee Year, as for the Sabbath year and the Sabbath day, was the Exodus. He went further to state

that God's people were to treat each other in ways radically different from all other nations because Yahweh had delivered them from Egypt. According to Meyer (2005: 107), verse 54 states the final option for a man if none of his brothers redeems him. He would go out (*yatsa*) in the Jubilee along with his sons. Hartley (1992: 442) concurred. Yahweh the Liberator called the people of Israel who had been freed from slavery to live in freedom and more than that to extend freedom to others (Kinsler, 1999: 398).

Each Jubilee, YHWH acts again as Israel's Redeemer (*go'el*). The Jubilee gave full assurance to every Israelite who had lost their land due to poverty that their land would be restored to them. It was a Sabbath both of rest for the land and of restoration of people to their family lands.

Leviticus 25:55b, *"They are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt. I am the Lord, your God."*

The Jubilee year is a guarantee that no Israelite would be reduced to slave status again, and it is a celebration of the great redemption when God brought Israel out of Egypt, so that He might be their God and they should be his people (Wenham, 1979: 323). This legislation on Jubilee concludes with the affirmation that Israel is Yahweh's servant whom He brought out from Egyptian bondage (Hartley, 1992: 442).

The general consensus of the scholars cited is that the Jubilee law ushered freedom for the slave and his children. This was the case especially for those slaves who had found no relative to redeem them. God became their Redeemer. This law helped to maintain land within the family as accurately pointed out by Wenham (1979: 323) when he said: "By keeping land within a particular family, the Jubilee also promoted family unity".

#### **4.3.8.11 Retention of land by Israel as a nation (Leviticus 26:1-5, 40-42)**

Leviticus 26:1-5 is of interest to us because it is a passage that discusses the retention of land in the context of the law on idolatry and the intention to observe the Sabbath.

Leviticus 26: 1-2 *"Do not make idols or set up own images or a sacred stone for yourself and do not place a covered stone in your land to bow down before it, I am the LORD your God. Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary, I am the Lord."*

According to Gerstenberger (1996: 402), Leviticus 26: 1-2 is dealing with fundamental statements that have significance to that of Deuteronomy 5:6-10; 6:4 or Micah 6:8. The commandment not to worship idols underscores the demand that Israel is to worship Yahweh alone (Hartley, 1992: 448). The prohibition against idols is given extensive attention in Leviticus 26:1 and one senses in these sentences the abhorrence of every sort of idol (Gerstenberger, 1996: 402-3).

The consensus here is that idolatry of all sorts was prohibited. This law along with the Sabbath instruction of Leviticus 25:2 form the context of the land related discussion in Leviticus 26: 3-6.

Leviticus 26:2 *“Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary, I am the Lord.”*

This fourth commandment of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:8-11) is restated and the next commandment is “revere my sanctuary”, the place where Yahweh dwells (Hartley, 1992: 450). The entire verse is a repetition of Leviticus 19:30 where the Sabbath of creation is intended (Milgrom, 2001: 2285). Milgrom (2001: 2285) went on to point out that the mention of the Sabbath and the sanctuary together means that both the temporal and spatial spheres of Yahweh must be respected. According to Gerstenberger (1996: 405), the admonition to revere the Sabbath and the sanctuary as identity symbols of Israel represented a fixed constituent part of the congregational worship. Hartley (1992: 450) noted that both the observance of the Sabbath and the reverence for the sanctuary acknowledged the supreme Lordship of Yahweh. He went on to state that they were integral to the worship of Yahweh. People must observe the Sabbath by resting from their earthly obligations and remembering Yahweh as the Creator and Redeemer. This Yahweh is a personal God and is not to be approached through human-made objects representing him.

The emerging trend here is that the scholars cited regard the Sabbath under discussion here as the fourth commandment of the Decalogue, and that this time was supposed to be honoured along with the sanctuary where God dwells.

The mentioning of these two commandments is followed by land related promises.

Leviticus 23:3-4 *“If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commandment, I will send you rain in its season and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruits.”*

Leviticus 23:3 begins a series of blessings that Yahweh promised to his people for their faithful observance of the covenant (Hartley, 1992: 462). Commenting on Leviticus 26: 3-13, Gerstenberger (1996: 406) stated that “This collection of life rules for worship and daily life concludes with a compact anticipation of the blessings that the obedient congregation might expect...” (1996:406). Milgrom (2001: 2289) and Hartley (1992:462) concurred.

The condition of walking in God’s decrees found in Leviticus 26:3 and repeated in verse 12 emphasizes the complementary relation between Israel’s behaviour and God’s response; if Israel walks in God’s commandments, God will walk among Israel (Milgrom, 2001: 2291). The promise to the faithful, obedient Yahweh congregation (vs. 3-13), reads like a description of the truly fulfilled life (Gerstenberger, 1996: 406). In the first blessing Yahweh promises to send the rains in their season (Hartley, 1992: 462). God’s giving presence gives rain and fertility which yield abundant nourishment (Milgrom, 2001: 2291).

The consensus of scholars cited on Leviticus 26:3-4 is that if Israel walked in God’s laws, God will provide for her with blessings of rains in due season. There would be no want of food in Israel.

Leviticus 26: 5-6 *“Your feeding will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land, I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid.”*

In addition to an abundant food supply, God promises that his people would dwell securely, enabling them to benefit from their hard labour (Hartley, 1992: 462). All the dreams of harmony, peace and well being are addressed (Gerstenberger, 1996: 406). Milgrom (2001: 2291) noted that peace in the land is the essence of God’s covenant as stated in Leviticus 26:6, 9.

The emerging trend here is that one of the blessings that would follow the nation of Israel if they obeyed God was the experience of peace in the land. One can conclude that for Israel as a nation to retain their place in the land of their inheritance, they needed to abide by the conditions of the covenant. Keeping the Sabbath holy and abstaining from idolatry constituted part of the conditions of keeping the covenant.

Leviticus 26:40-42 *“But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers, their treachery against me and their hostility towards me, which made me hostile towards them so that I send them into the land of their enemies then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham and I will remember the land.”*

If Israel could come to realize that they were in bondage to another nation solely because of their iniquitous deeds and would repent of their iniquities, they could move Yahweh to change their miserable circumstances (Hartley, 1992: 1469). The possibility of restoring the divine favour by the acknowledgement and remorse of sin is unique to the Bible (Milgrom, 2001: 23, 29). Israel’s admission of guilt and the fact that Yahweh held fast to His people brought about a turn of events (Gerstenberger, 1996: 429).

The emerging trend here is that restoration of divine favour on Israel followed the confession of sin to Yahweh by the nation.

According to Gerstenberger (1996: 431), the term ‘remember’ is actually an undertaking completely oriented toward action, the active turning of the deity’s attention toward human beings. Milgrom (2001: 2334) noted that the word ‘remember’ here means more than to recollect, but also to take action on what is recalled. By stating that he will remember his covenant with the patriarchs, Yahweh strongly and definitively affirmed that he would come to rescue Israel from the captivity (Hartley, 1992: 469). According to Milgrom (2001: 2330), all one can infer from the statement that God ‘remembers’ His covenant is that Israel would be returned from exile.

The consensus of the scholars cited above is that the word ‘remember’ is used to refer to the act of God coming to do something about the human predicament. In the case of Israel, when Yahweh is said to have remembered his covenant to her while in exile, this pointed to the fact that God came to rescue her from exile and to restore her to the land of her heritage. If Israel forfeited her land of heritage due to sin, that was not the end. God had determined that Israel could still be restored to her land of heritage if she repented and confessed her sins.

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

To conclude, I will revisit the various areas that I covered in studying the Sabbath year in the Book of Leviticus.

The burnt offering (Lev 1-7) served to meet the diverse spiritual needs of Israel and was the basic Israelite sacrifice. Its implications with regards to the Sabbath year is that the Sabbath year was supposed to portray a God who took pleasure in meeting the various needs of the people. In connection with land, I discovered that the great importance attached to worship as exemplified by the burnt offering, strongly suggests that complete consecration to YHWH was a condition given to Israel if she was to be assured of her continued occupation of the land of Canaan as a nation.

The inauguration of worship at the tabernacle was a work that was executed so as to set both the tabernacle and the priesthood apart for holy use. These two institutions, both linked to the worship of YHWH, were meant to facilitate Israel's relationship to YHWH. Israel as a nation was supposed to value the relationship with YHWH. If Israel neglected the relationship to YHWH, her assurance of a continued stay in the land of Canaan was endangered. Along with the Sabbath year, the tabernacle and the priesthood point to a God who is holy and a God who demands that His sacred institutions and laws should be regarded as holy and that these laws should be observed according to His instructions.

From the discussion of laws of ritual purity (Lev 11-15), I found that the Sabbath year was supposed to be a time to affirm the full humanity of all persons regardless of gender. It was also a time to reflect on God's gifts and praise Him in return especially for gifts of children. Land was the other important gift people were supposed to celebrate and guard because it gave security to children that were being born.

Concerning Leviticus 16, I discussed the regulations of the Day of Atonement. I found that on this day, God through the purging of blood ceremonies, cleansed the sins of Israel and removed them from the presence of His people. This ceremony assured the nation that God's presence would continue with them. Also, the ceremony assured the people that the God who cared so much as to forgive Israel her most grievous sins, could be counted on to give Israel security in the land. The Day of Atonement, the weekly Sabbath and the Fallow Year were categorized as the most solemn of Israel's rest periods. These solemn periods pointed to a God who provides rest for His people and His land.

The section to do with laws on holy living (Lev 17-26) is quite broad. The introductory formula (Lev 17:1) served to point out that the authority behind the messages immediately

following was the authority of God and not man. The introductory formula also introduces the Fallow Year Law (Lev 25:2-7). This means that the Fallow Year Law is a divine law.

The call of Israel to obey divine decrees (Lev 18:4) was meant to help Israel to know that her assurance of a continued place in the land was conditional. It depended on her obedience to God's decrees. The Sabbath Year Law was one of the decrees Israel needed to obey to be assured of her continued stay in the land.

Leviticus 19:3 commanded the nation to be holy as God is holy. In this call we learned that God was calling Israel to be different from other nations. This call actually meant that Israel had to obey all of God's laws including the weekly Sabbath and the command to children to obey their parents. The God who is holy called Israel to social morality through the parental commandment and He called Israel to spiritual vitality through the observance of the Sabbath. The Sabbath year (Lev 25:2-7), if it was to be of value to Israel, needed to assimilate the spiritual vitality of the Sabbath day. Not only was the land to rest in this year, but the people also needed to take advantage of this rest period for the land to nourish themselves spiritually. Whereas on the Sabbath day people rested from their work, in the Sabbath year the land rested from human interference through agricultural activities.

The ceremony of bringing first fruits reminded Israel that God is the Giver of both crops and of the land from which the crops came suggesting that Israel herself was to act as a steward of God's resources. By instilling the concept that the Israelites were stewards of God, this law encouraged Israel to take care of the land with a sense of accountability. The weekly Sabbath, the Sabbath Year and the ceremony of bringing first fruits to God were all an acknowledgement that YHWH is the Owner and Giver of land.

During the Feast of Trumpets, people renewed their covenant with God and prayed for rains. This institution shared the same theological purpose with the Sabbath year, to point to God as a Covenant Keeping God and as Provider.

The year of Jubilee occurred after seven weeks of years and was a very sacred year which commenced after the Day of Atonement when the sins of the nation had been cleansed. It was actually celebrated in the fiftieth year and its onset was heralded by the blowing of a ram's horn. This year provided for release from debt, from slavery and also provided for people to return to their patrimony. The God portrayed here is a God who is sovereign over time and uses time to better the plight of ailing humanity. In the year of Jubilee He restored human



beings rendered homeless by poverty back to their properties. He is indeed a God of new beginnings.

In the year of Jubilee and the Sabbath year when Israel was not supposed to sow or reap, God provided for their needs. He is therefore a God who provides. He is also God of environmental sustenance. He gave land rest from tilling and He also gave vines and orchards rest from human agricultural interferences.

Land, according to the law of Jubilee, belongs to God and was not supposed to be bought or sold on a permanent basis. God ordained that land was to stay in the hands of the family that inherited it. Any selling of land was done with the understanding that what was sold was not the land but the number of harvests. The land itself reverted automatically to its owners in the year of Jubilee. In the process of leasing out land to each other, the debtors and creditors were to transact the whole exercise in the fear of God.

Because of the fact that creditors usually had an upper hand over debtors in the buying and selling of land, they were also called upon to act in the fear of the God. This law ensured that the process of redeeming land by the economically weaker brother was not unnecessarily impeded by the exploiting spirit of the creditor. This law made it easy for land that was lost to return to the family. The God portrayed here is a God of redemption and keenly interested in matters of social and economic justice and is driven by the desire to see the economically weaker brother given a just chance in business.

If people kept God's decrees including the Jubilee law, they would have experienced the following blessings: military and economic security, high agricultural productions in the sixth year and availability of food in good quantities. This law paints to us a God who is a Protector of His people from human enemies and economic hardships. He is a Provider God. What He required from Israel was allegiance of their hearts to the covenant and obedience to all His commandments.

According to the laws of redemption, God was the Owner of land and the Israelites were tenants and aliens. Each piece of property was to be provided with a right of redemption. If any Israelite became insolvent and forfeited his land, the law said that a kinsman redeemer was supposed to come and redeem the sold land and hold it until the year of Jubilee. This prevented the loss of land from the clan. The land reverted to the actual owner in the year of Jubilee.

In the event that no kinsman redeemer was found, a man could act as his own redeemer. If he became prosperous he could go to the creditor and seek a repurchase of his land. The price of the repurchase was supposed to be the amount of the original sale less the number of years the land had been used by the purchaser. If the debtor could not redeem his land himself then he would have to wait for the year of the Jubilee to return to his patrimony. The God portrayed here is a God of redemption with inexhaustible means of deliverance. One way or the other His ultimate goal to ensure that land remained within the family was realized.

The laws for houses in cities were not covered in the Jubilee. If a person sold away a house in a walled city, he had an opportunity to redeem it in one year but if the year elapsed, the house was forever lost. This law proves that God is sovereign over all domains of human habitation and works through His laws to ensure that land remained within the family.

The evidence in connection with the Year of Jubilee is that this Law in its various facets ensured that land remained within the hands of families who inherited it. The Law portrays God prominently as Redeemer, Provider and Protector.

To maintain land as a nation Israel needed to love God supremely and keep His Laws. At the beginning of this chapter I indicated that the goal was to investigate how the theological trends in the book of Leviticus affected the maintenance of land within the family. My investigation of the Book of Leviticus and especially the discussion on the Year of Jubilee has so far yielded positive results. I will now examine a few texts from Leviticus 26 which is the last chapter in the Holiness Code.

The year of Jubilee presents God as the great Liberator who in that year ensured that liberty was proclaimed, all debts were cancelled, landowners who had leased their patrimony returned to their land whilst Israelite debtor slaves were released. The proclamation of liberty helped families to regain their lost land.

The year of Jubilee was similar to the Sabbath year especially in matters regarding instructions on sowing, harvesting and the general prohibition of work. These institutions were also similar in sanctity.

The law concerning the buying and selling of land ensured that land could only be rented out and never be sold outright. This law clearly ensured that land remained in the hands of the family. During the Sabbath year and the Jubilee God would prevent the loss of land by Israel

due to enemy invasions and He could also sustain Israel in the land by providing her with abundance of food.

The law of Jubilee also stated that land was not supposed to be sold in perpetuity because it belonged to God whilst the Israelites fulfilled the role of aliens and tenants. Land sold reverted to its original owner in the year of Jubilee. To make sure land remained within the family, the law provided a redemption plan for land. Before one could dispose of land because of poverty, a kinsman redeemer was supposed to step in and purchase the land so that it would remain within the clan and revert to the actual owner in the year of Jubilee. One had also the right to redeem his own property if he prospered. Houses in walled cities could be redeemed within the period of one year after sale. After that period, the house belonged to the buyer on a permanent basis. The Jubilee law ensured that land remained within the family. Levites on the other hand had an enduring right to redeem their houses in the cities since their houses were treated as their ‘agricultural land.’

The law also provided for the Israelite servants. These were not to be given slave treatment. They were to be treated rather as hired workers. The Israelites were called upon as well to act quickly on behalf of an Israelite who had become a slave to a resident foreigner.

The charging of interest to a fellow Israelite was prohibited because it created conditions that led to servitude and eventual loss of one’s land and freedom. In the year of Jubilee indentured Israelite slaves were released with their families and restored to their family lands. If the nation of Israel kept its part of the covenant God promised to give them blessings of food and peace in the land. The tithing plan reminded Israel that God was the Owner of their material and temporal resources and they were stewards.

Sexual immorality as practiced by the Egyptians and Canaanites was also forbidden. It is these practices that led the Canaanites to forfeit their heritage of land and if Israel fell into the same sins, God was going to eject them from the land as well. If Israel was to be assured of a secure place in the land of Canaan, the condition was that she needed to live a life in conformity to God’s will in all areas of life including the sexual area as well. From a theological point of view, wrong sexual conduct would lead the land to become non-productive because of a curse coming from God in the form of droughts, wars, or plagues (Hartley, 1992: 298). The Sabbath year by implication was supposed to be a year when Israel as a nation was to contemplate on the purity of life.

In this study, I found that the Sabbath year and Jubilee laws were not utopian laws beyond the reach of human reality. They are laws that could have been observed had Israel cooperated with God. The Jubilee law explicitly stated that families dispossessed of their land had the divine provision to repossess it. This provision empowered these families to return to the land of their patrimony.

The laws in the Holiness Code generally point to a God who is holy and whose institutions are holy. He is a God whose standard of holiness is high suggesting that even the Sabbath year law was supposed to be viewed as holy and observed according to God's instruction. Israelites were supposed to be good managers of time. They were supposed to work hard on the regular days and years and to rest during appointed holidays.

God gave Israel the land of Canaan to be their heritage. It was further God's plan that each family in Israel was supposed to own its own land. For that reason, God put laws in place to ensure that no family would permanently lose its land for one reason or another. If the nation of Israel as a whole lived in conformity to God's laws she would have lived in the land and God would protect her from dangers that would threaten her to lose her heritage. If on the other hand Israel disobeyed God, God would either destroy her or drive her out of the land. One can therefore conclude that Israel's stay in the land was conditional. She needed to cooperate with the LORD. Families that desired to remain in the land had also to uphold God's laws.

The theology of Leviticus as I see it possesses a number of unique features. In Leviticus there is a great and elaborate emphasis on the sacrificial system which describes different kinds of sacrifices that Israel was supposed to present before the LORD (Lev 1-7). Among these sacrifices, the burnt offering was the leading sacrifice. From this sacrifice it was found that it was a whole sacrifice which represented the wholehearted attitude with which believers should come to God. This sacrifice met every conceivable human, emotional and spiritual need. It portrays to us a God who provides for all the needs of His people. He is a God who demanded wholehearted devotion from His people and at the same time He provided for all their needs. It was found that the emphasis on sacrifice pointed to the fact that life for Israel in the land was to be characterized by a close relationship to God.

The Sabbath year provided a special window of time to nurture that relationship facilitating the meeting of every conceivable human need. When that relationship was strong and good

Israel's place in the land was assured but if the relationship was broken Israel's continued place in the land was threatened and would eventually be jeopardised.

The Book of Leviticus also has unique emphasis on holiness in life. In this book one finds the challenge given to Israel to be holy so as to resemble God in His holiness (Lev 19:3). For God that holiness entailed His essential, moral and spiritual difference from His creation. For Israel, holiness entailed being different from other nations in her moral and spiritual life. To be more specific, holiness for Israel meant that her life in the areas of sexuality, observance of rituals and special days were all guided by standards of purity and theological assumptions totally different from those of the nations surrounding them. The Israelites had to be different from their neighbors in their sexual practices and in the way in which they worshipped God. The Sabbath year challenged people to contemplate not only on purity of life but more seriously also on God who could make that difference in the life possible.

The ordination of the priests, another unique element about the Book of Leviticus, pointed to the reality that the priest's life was wholly consecrated to the service of God. His hands were full with the responsibility of the priesthood. From this event we learned that when the Sabbath year was set apart for a special purpose, that purpose was adequate. The Sabbath year requirements were to be recognized as the only ones that gave meaning to the Sabbath year and as such were to be strictly adhered to.

The theology of Leviticus is also unique in that in Leviticus alone in the Pentateuch one finds the institution of the Year of Jubilee (Lev: 25:8-54). The Jubilee occurred after every seven weeks of years in the fiftieth year. In the Jubilee the dominant theological portrayal of God is that He is the Owner of land. As Owner of land He gave land to the Israelites by families and decreed that family land was to remain in the family on a permanent basis.

To ensure that land would remain within the family, He instituted many laws of which the Jubilee is the most elaborate and explicit one. Since God was the Owner of land the Israelites had to play the role of tenants over God's land. In God's plan, if a family forfeited its land for any reason, that family had a right to redeem it or some near relative could do it on the family's behalf. If the redemption arrangement failed the next plan which God put in place was the year of Jubilee. The Jubilee Law provided for the restoration of all land to its heirs irrespective of how it had been taken away from them. In this year the return of land to families of ownership was automatic. The only land that could not be returned is land that

was consecrated to the temple because the Law said land dedicated to the Temple could not be redeemed. Houses in walled cities were also not affected by the Jubilee Law. These could only be redeemed within one year of their sale.

This knowledge provides a better understanding of the Sabbath year Law institution in that the Sabbath year was intended to challenge the people to appreciate the fact that land is a gift from God and that human beings acted as stewards and tenants of God's land and as such needed to manage it with a sense of accountability to Him.

The Jubilee was also a year in which slaves were released and this concept suggests that the Sabbath year needed to challenge people to take humanitarian duties like the releasing of slaves, cancelling of debts and taking care of the poor seriously. In other words the humanitarian touch that characterized the year of Jubilee was supposed to find expression in the Sabbath year.

With the insights just presented, I can conclude that the theological trends in the Book of Leviticus generally favoured the retention of land within the family.

## CHAPTER 5

### MAINTENANCE OF LAND ACCORDING TO A CLOSE READING OF THE SABBATH LAW IN LEVITICUS 25:1-7

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Thus far, I have examined the motivations for the Sabbath year in the Covenant, Deuteronomic and Holiness Codes. I also examined the theological trends in the Covenant, Deuteronomic and Holiness Codes and the theological trends in the books of Exodus, Deuteronomy and Leviticus. The focus of this chapter is on the central text of this thesis, namely Leviticus 25:1-7. In this chapter, I will employ a close reading approach in order to establish what this Scripture passage says about the Sabbath year and retention of land within the family.

#### 5.2 LEVITICUS 25:1

Leviticus 25:1 “*The LORD said to Moses on Mount Sinai...*”

This text constitutes an introductory formula (Hartley, 1992: 433). The introductory formula was a common expression used by Bible writers to indicate how a prophet or messenger of God received his oracles from God before he communicated them to the people, either in speech or in writing. Hartley (1992: 433) rightly noted that the mentioning of Moses underscores the authority of this speech. Gerstenberger’s (1996: 369) translation of this text reads: “*Yahweh spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai*”. He goes on to say that the locating of Leviticus 25 on Mount Sinai in his view was possibly inspired by Exodus 19; 24; 32; and 34 where Mount Sinai appears as the place of Moses’ commission. In other words, Gerstenberger is not convinced that Leviticus 25 had its origin at Mount Sinai or from Moses.

Milgrom (2001: 2152) supports arguments that link the giving of the Sabbath year legislation with Sinai. The first argument entails that just like the Mesopotamian kings who freed

indentured slaves when they ascended the throne, the divine King of kings freed the Israelites from the Egyptian bondage at Sinai. The second argument says since chapters 25 and 26 of Leviticus deal primarily with the edicts releasing persons and property as well as with covenant issues they were linked to Sinai. Milgrom (2001) further suggested: “The possibility must also be considered that the placement of these chapters here implies that Moses relayed YHWH’s Sinaitic instructions to Israel at this juncture in the wilderness.” (2001:2152).

I do agree with Hartley (1992: 433) when he argues that the mention of Moses underscored the authority of this speech. Moses is mentioned several times in the Pentateuch as an important leader of the Israelites and therefore, a man of great authority. The Sabbath year was promulgated by God, the divine King of Israel through one of Israel’s great leaders, namely Moses. The suggestion by Gerstenberger (1996: 369) that the localization of Leviticus 25 and 26 were inspired by contents of Exodus 19; 24; and 34, is to be rejected because it implies the events recorded in these two chapters did not necessarily occur as they are recorded. The internal evidence of these two chapters on the other hand affirms the events related actually happened as recorded.

### 5.3 LEVITICUS 25:2

Leviticus 25:2: *“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘when you enter the land (’eres) I am going to give you, the land (’eres) itself must observe a Sabbath to the LORD.”*

Casperson (2003: 283) stated that the sabbatical sequence was part of a system in which time was divided up into consecutive seven year periods analogous to the seven days of the week. As with the Sabbath day of the week, he continued, the seventh or sabbatical year in each period was set aside as a time for rest, celebration and spiritual renewal. Shead (2002: 20) saw the Sabbath year of Leviticus 25:2-7 as an expansion of the Sabbath year legislation of Exodus 23:10-11. Kinsler (1999: 396) concurred.

Paran (1983: 15-19, 259-61) cited by Milgrom (2001: 2154-5) concurred with Shead that the text of Leviticus 25: 2-7 is based on Exodus 23:10-11. He cited the following parallel concepts in the two texts:



**Lev 25:2-7**

When you enter the land that I give you, **the land shall observe a Sabbath to YHWH.**

Six years you may sow your field, and six years you may prune your vineyard, and gather in its produce.

But in the seventh year **there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath to YHWH;** You may neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard.

The aftergrowth of your harvest you shall not reap, nor the grapes of your untrimmed vines shall you pick; **it shall be (a year of) complete rest for the land.**

But the Sabbath (-yield) of the Lord will be for you to eat; for you, for your male and female slaves, your resident hirelings, who live under your authority, your livestock and the wild animals in your land - will be (available for you) to eat

**Exodus 23;10-11**

Six years you may sow your land and gather in its produce;

But in the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow.

Eat if you may the needy of your people, and what they leave the wild beast may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves.

The author of Leviticus had the text of Exodus as counterpart before him (Paran, 1989: 29-34 cited by Milgrom, 2001: 2155). These parallels have led scholars to conclude that Leviticus 25:1-7 was based on Exodus 23:10-11. Leviticus 25:1-7 is viewed by many scholars as

related to Exodus 23:10-11. These parallels help us to see the thematic unity that exists between the Covenant Code and the Holiness Code.

Commenting on the origin of the Sabbath year and the Jubilee, Kinsler (1999: 397) suggested that the roots of the Sabbath and the Jubilee go back to the early experience of the followers of Yahweh. Gnuse (1985: 44) also pointed out that though the sabbatical and jubilee laws were promulgated in the exilic period, there are scholars who feel the actual practice may reflect activities prior to the life of the monarchy (1200-1050 B.C.E).

Gnuse (1985: 44) argued that the concept of land redistribution or restoration would have been possible in Israel's early years when the economy was simple and such practices would not have caused social and economic upheaval. Kinsler (1999: 397) similarly noted that it could be that the decentralized political economy of the tribe, centred in the Liberator God required the Israelites to reject the surrounding models of wealth accumulation and to institute practices that would protect the life and well being of the peasant population. He further noted that these ideals were reformulated at critical moments in Israel's history and the Priestly tradition played an important role in maintaining these mandates as sacred not just as civil obligations.

Arguing for the early settlement period Gnuse (1985: 46) said that the idea of restoring of the land to the original families would make sense in this early period and the process would not be hindered by any concept of private ownerships, an idea which would develop with the rise of kingship.

Since the decree concerning the sabbatical and jubilee is effective in the first regnal year of Israel's sovereign LORD in His land it resembles the practice of the *misarum* issued by the Babylonian Kings during the year of their assumption of the throne (Milgrom, 2001: 2552). Since *misarum* declarations were made by Kings in the rest of the ancient Near East and Israel did not have a king in the early period the custom of land restoration had to be legislated and fixed on a permanent cycle rather than being spontaneous (Ginzberg, 1932: 364-91 cited by Gnuse, 1985: 46).

The consensus of the scholars cited is that the institutions of the Sabbath year and Jubilee had their origin during the early settlement period. I think it is true as suggested by Gnuse (1985: 46) that in the early settlement period there was no king in Israel. Yahweh as suggested by Milgrom (2001: 2552) was Israel's King at that time. This suggests that the reckoning of the

Sabbath year and Jubilee year sacred periods began at the time of Israel's entry into the land of Canaan.

The Sabbath year was known as the 'Sabbatical year' (*shabbat shabbaton*) and God as the Owner of land gave it to Israel as an inheritance for entering into the covenant with Him and God's concern was that land would experience periodic rest every seventh year (Hartley, 1992: 433). Baker (1998: 55) said the sabbatical and jubilee year regulations include the idea of rest (Exod 23:10 –11; Lev 25:2-5; 26: 33-35). Concerning the purpose behind allowing land to rest in the seventh year, he said this was to have man and woman acknowledge that they do not have any absolute right over the land. He went on to stress the point that men and women may not exploit the land indiscriminately for their own profit driven by the pressures of consumerism because they have been permitted to live there and enjoy its produce as a blessing from the Owner of the land Himself, the LORD God (Ex 15:17).

Hartley (1992: 433) went on to elaborate that God wanted his people to be free from continuous labour so that they might have time to enjoy the gift of the Promised Land. Observance of the Sabbath year, he asserted, was for purposes of honouring Yahweh as the phrase "Sabbath to Yahweh" communicates. Such observance demonstrated that people acknowledged Yahweh's ownership of the land and that the people placed their trust in Him for their food supply. Baker (1998: 55), in addressing the theological ethical implications of the sabbatical years and Jubilee, suggested that the idea of rest points towards restraint in the exploitation of the land, indeed of the whole environment. He further contended that the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year invite us to accept the produce of the land as a gift from God rather than as an absolute human right.

The important consensus here is that the Sabbath years reminded the Israelites that their land was a gift from God and as such human beings were supposed to care for it with consideration of what God said.

The other thing Baker (1998) pointed out which needs to be taken into consideration when human beings relate to the land was the question of consideration of the next generation. He argued "Perhaps we need to develop a religious ecology on which the conversation of the material resources is based on the conviction that God created them and God has the right to determine how they are used. A corollary of this, on the basis of love for God and for neighbour as the two great commandments, would be that we aim to leave the world in a good condition for the enjoyment of the future generations."(1998:55)

I agree with Hartley (1992: 433) when he posits that the people's observance of this law was a way of acknowledging Yahweh's ownership of land because as the text clearly states it, land was acquired by Israel as a gift from God. The fact that God went on to put restrictions on how the land was going to be used suggests to me that He wanted the people not to lose sight of the reality that God is the Owner of land and that the land needed to be managed with care.

I also think that the recognition of God's ownership of land laid the foundation for retention of land within the family. I hold this position because the recognition of God's ownership of land has as its corollary the fact that whatever land humans own comes to them as a gift from God and that they have no absolute right over it, to sell it or to dispose of it at will. This reality also entails that individual persons acknowledged that they were stewards of land, accountable to God the real Owner of land. In addition to this, the realization that each piece of land an individual held was his/her gift from God rendered that piece of land a heritage status that could only be revoked by God, the One who had given the land to that family in the first place. The Sabbath year, by reminding human beings that God is the Owner of land and by reminding humans that they were stewards of God's land helped land to remain within the family.

Gerstenberger (1996: 375) contended that the Priestly tradition took the law of slave release (Exod 21:2-11; Deut 15:12-18) and turned it into the sabbatical year for fields and the year of Jubilee. He dismissed the Sabbath year concept which allowed for all the land to lie fallow for a whole agricultural year season as something "extraordinarily alienated from reality."

The Sabbath year as a 'sabbatical year' (*Shabbat shabbaton*) signified that YHWH as the Owner of the land has the right to demand restraint in its use (Milgrom 2001: 2152). The land had to rest in each sabbatical year. Milgrom (2001: 2152) said the clause "*the land shall observe*" in Leviticus 25:2 literally translates, "the land shall rest". He further points out that the expression '*Sabbath laYHWH*' in this verse is grammatically more an objective than a subjective genitive. This implies that YHWH was not observing the Sabbath but that as the land had its rest in the Sabbath year, it was imbued with His presence. The land, so to speak, is to be returned to its condition as the Sabbath of creation. The motivation of the Sabbath year in the Holiness Code as attested by Hartley (1992: 433) and Milgrom (2001: 2152) was rest for the land unto the LORD.

This rest for the land unto the LORD as posited by Hartley (1992: 433) and Milgrom (2001: 2152) points to the seventh year when by a decree of YHWH the land would lie unploughed and unused to demonstrate that land belonged to the LORD.

Two opposite views concerning the observance of the Sabbath year can be noted. Gerstenberger (1996: 375) dismisses the concept of the Sabbath year where the land is unused for a whole year as ‘extraordinarily removed from reality,’ whilst Milgrom (2001: 2162), working with the assumption that the obligations of the Sabbath year were indeed within the realm of the practical, said that the Sabbath year was supposed to be kept unto the LORD. The argument in our view is in Milgrom’s favour as will be seen in the following analysis of the remaining verses (2001: 2157).

#### **5.4 LEVITICUS 25:3**

Leviticus 25:3 reads: “*For six years sow your fields and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops.*”

There is structural similarity between the wording of the sabbatical year text and the wording of the Sabbath commandment and also a theological similarity between the sabbatical year and the weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue in that both place the land under the Lordship of God (Milgrom, 2001: 2156). Milgrom (2001: 2156) went further to elaborate that the six years of the Sabbath were agricultural years and not civic years which begun in the spring (Exod 12:2). In the sixth year, he asserted, the last harvest took place in the autumn before the Feast of Tabernacles. The produce, known as *tebu’a*, encompassed the entire yield of the field: the threshing floor (grain), the vat (grapes, olives) and fruit. After the harvest of the sixth year the work on the land was ended.

Milgrom’s (2001: 2157) observations concerning the structural and theological similarities between the seven year cycle of years and the seven day week appear very close. To me, these similarities point to the reality that God is LORD both of the weekly Sabbath and the Sabbath year because these two institutions are marks of God as Creator. After creating the world in six days God rested on the seventh day (Gen 2 1-3) and so by demanding that ‘man’ should rest on the seventh day and that ‘land’ should rest in the seventh year God was calling on man to acknowledge the fact that God owns the land by creation.

In my investigation of the theological trends in the Book of Exodus it was discovered that creation is the most basic theological category with which the work of Exodus works (Fretheim, 2003: 253). In Fretheim's view, it was the Creator God who caused the Israelites to be fruitful and multiply and grow strong in Egypt (2003: 253). Carpenter (1997: 600) also argued that the multiplication of the Israelites in Egypt was not an environmental or biological issue at all; it was a theological issue in which the LORD was involved. He further pointed out that the multiplication was a result of God's original blessing of creation.

From this portrayal of God as Creator, I discovered the analogous relationship that exists between God's initial creation and God's 'creation' of Israel into His people during their deliverance from Egypt. I also found that in both 'creation' events, God ended up giving human beings land where they could live.

This concept was alluded to by Westermann (1978: 95) when he said: "the creature existence of human life means human life in all its relationships in existence; the person who is merely made (Gen 2:7) is not yet the creature intended by God. The creation of humanity includes the living space (the garden), the means of life (the fruits of the garden), the occupation or work (cultivate and preserve), and the community (man and woman), and as a medium of community language".

The point emerging from this argument is that just as God provided for the humans he created with land he would do the same with Israel after creating them. He provided Israel with her own garden, the land of Canaan. The land of Canaan was hence a gift from God to be cultivated and cared for by Israel. The Sabbath year, like its similar institution the weekly Sabbath provided human beings with time to worship and praise God for creating them, redeeming them and giving them land.

Shead (2002: 24) noted that "the goal of God's creation as expressed in the seventh day and the Sabbath day was fruitfulness, dominion and relationship. It is for the same goal that God redeemed Israel from the Egyptian bondage and brought them to the land; the path to this goal was covenant faithfulness. The land of Canaan was thus a new Eden, a new creation in miniature, and to live out the truth of this by obedient fellowship with God was to live sabbatically. By giving the land itself a Sabbath the people had an opportunity to realize this eschatology even more completely, as they and the land experienced year long alleviation from the curse".

The creation of humanity, as I see it, also included the creation of the tree of knowledge of good and evil that gave restriction to man to test his loyalty to God. The tree in the middle of the garden as I see it represented the covenant law in the experience of Israel. Just as the tree of knowledge of good and evil served to test Adam and Eve's loyalty to the Creator God at the beginning the terms of the Covenant given to Israel to God was there to test their loyalty to Him. In our discussion on the role played by the law of God in maintaining the land within the family we noted that the God who gave the law as a gift also gave the land as a gift to Israel. The law governed how land was to be used and managed. The land on the other hand provided human beings with temporal needs so that they could worship the LORD with joy walking according to the law. The Sabbath year apart from being a year of covenant renewal was a time that both governed the human's use of the land and pointed humanity to the Creator of the land.

## 5.5 LEVITICUS 25:4

Leviticus 25:4 reads: *"But in the seventh year the land is to have a Sabbath of rest, a Sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards."*

Of the numbers that carry symbolic significance in the Bible seven is the most important (Ryken and Wilhoit, 1998: 774). This number as these authorities earlier noted symbolised totality or completeness. They further noted that the basis for much use of this number in the Bible has its basis in the seven day week which according to Genesis 2:1-3 belongs to the God given structure of creation and the fact that God completed His work of creation in seven days.

The wording of the fourth commandment supports the position taken by Ryken and Wilhoit (1998: 774). The commandment as stated in the Book of Exodus identifies the seventh day as the Sabbath day which was to be observed because God finished His work of creation and rested on the Sabbath day and sanctified that day (Exod 20:8-11).

The Sabbath year occurred in the seventh year (Exod 23:0-11; Lev 25:2-7). After six years of tilling the ground, in the seventh year the land was to remain unused and unploughed and people would eat of the natural growth of the land. The Sabbath day legislation as articulated in Exodus 23:10-11 had much in common with the Sabbath year in terms of similarity in structure and content. They share the same structure and similar social and environmental concerns and are all built around the number seven.

In the Sabbath year in the Covenant Code, the land rested and the spontaneous after growth was meant to provide food for the poor and wild animals whilst on the Sabbath day (Exod 23:12) the people were supposed to rest along with domestic animals, slaves and aliens within the household. In Leviticus 25:2-7 the land was supposed to rest and the after growth of the land was supposed to provide food for the landowner, his male and female servants, temporary resident and domestic animals. In both the Covenant Code and Holiness Code the land rested as an acknowledgment that land belonged to God. In the Deuteronomic Code the remission of debts was meant to benefit Israelite debtors only.

In the sabbatical year in the Holiness Code all farming was to cease, the landowner was neither to sow his fields nor to prune his vines or fruit trees (Hartley, 1992: 433). The number seven occurs seven times in Leviticus 25 and the expression ‘a Sabbath of complete rest’ is a translation from the Hebrew *shabbat shabbaton* (Milgrom, 2001: 2158). This expression, Milgrom (2001: 2158) explained, occurs with only the Sabbath (Lev. 23:3) and the Day of Purgation (Lev 23:32) which are the only days when abstention from all labour is prescribed. In the Sabbath year tillable land was supposed to enjoy its rest and, remarkably, nothing is said concerning implications of this practice with respect to daily life apart from sowing fields (Gerstenberger 1996: 375).

Hartley (1992: 433) and Milgrom (2001: 2152) picture the Sabbath year as a year of complete rest for the land. A major commentary on the rest of the Sabbath year has been presented in our discussion of Leviticus 25:2.

## 5.6 LEVITICUS 25:5

Leviticus 25:5 “*Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest.*”

This text meant that no one was allowed to harvest that which grew of itself either in the fields or in the vineyards because people were not supposed to profit from the natural growth of the seventh year (Hartley, 1992: 433). Gerstenberger (1996: 376), in commenting on the message of Leviticus 25:5 did so by completing the question he begun in commenting on Leviticus 25:4. He raised the question: “How is life to go on if in the seventh year if no fields may be planted, indeed if not even the after growth may be eaten?” One can tell that Gerstenberger (1996: 376) missed the point by ignoring part of the Sabbath year message which endorsed that the after growth was to be used as food to stipulated groups of people and even animals.



Milgrom (2001: 2158) actually said that there is ample evidence that the after growth of the fallow year was so abundant that at times two or three harvests were obtained from one after growth in the Galilee Highlands. The vine and fruit trees furnished ample produce during the fallow year because they did not need labour.

The emphasis of Leviticus 25:5 according to Milgrom (2001: 2152) and Hartley (1992: 433) is that during the Sabbath year the after growth provided adequate food for everyone, answering the question of Gerstenberger (1996: 376) on how people lived if they did not farm their land for a whole agricultural year. I agree with Hartley (1992: 433) and Milgrom (2001: 2152) that during the Sabbath year the after growth provided adequate food for everyone because the productivity of the land in that year as attested by Milgrom (2001: 2152) made it quite feasible. I also see the LORD who instituted the Sabbath year intervening in a special way to ensure that in this year every person had adequate food to eat. In other words God caused the land to be more productive in this year. The Sabbath year hence can be seen as a symbol of God's providential care for His people when without personal labour in the land the people enjoyed life on God's bounties.

I see the Sabbath year as having the following other elements that helped land to remain within the family. Firstly, by assuring all people of adequate food, the Sabbath year put a check on the rate of individuals' declining into poverty which led to loss of land. In the Sabbath year the financial means the people had were used for other developmental purposes than to buy food. Secondly, the exercise of leaving the land to lie fallow in the Sabbath year allowed the soil to become richer in its nutrients thus preparing it for a better crop in the following farming year. I see the Sabbath year as having worked to produce healthier people and a healthier land, creating an environment where the decline into poverty was checked and the loss of family land due to poverty was minimised.

## **5.7 LEVITICUS 25:6**

Leviticus 25:6 *“Whatever the land yields during the Sabbath year will be food for you – for yourself, your manservant and maidservant, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you.”*

According to Hartley (1992: 434), all members of the household were to eat from the produce of the Sabbath year thanking God for their daily food and no one living in Israel was excluded from gathering the produce of the Sabbath year. Gerstenberger (1996: 375) saw verse 6 as one

of the proposed two answers addressing the predicament created in verse 4 and 5. In the sixth year, edible plants growing wild on uncultivated land were apparently to suffice for feeding both human beings and animals. He went on to suggest that this interpretation of verse 6 was uncertain since the verse speaks ‘proverbially’ only of the ‘Sabbath of the land that you may eat.’ The only possible meaning of the natural Sabbath year yields according to him was the wild growths and this in his argument would obviously not be able to meet the food needs of the people.

The after growth of the Sabbath year was able to supply adequate food for the people, and the recipients of the sabbatical yields of the after growth were five in number according to the list of Leviticus 25:6 and not everyone benefited from the after growth except those listed (Milgrom, 2001: 2159). In taking this position, I think Milgrom (2001: 2159) went a bit far in adhering to the letter of the law. I think all needy persons benefited this year as suggested by Exodus 23:10-11. Leviticus 25:2 does not necessarily oppose Exodus 23:10-11 and it does not act as a corrective to it either. Leviticus 25 supplements Exodus 23.

## 5.8 LEVITICUS 25:7

The last text under consideration is the Holiness Code is Leviticus 25:7 *“As well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land. Whatever the land produces may be eaten.”*

The nearest Gerstenberger (1996: 375) came to commenting on the contents of Leviticus 25:7 is when he remarked that edible plants growing wild on the uncultivated land were supposed to suffice for feeding both human beings and animals. He mentioned this in connection with contents of verse six but he did not address the contents of Leviticus 25:7 as a literary unit.

The contents of Leviticus 25:7 are connected to the list of beneficiaries of the Sabbath year’s growth begun in Leviticus 25:6 and it needs to be stressed that the after-growth of the sabbatical years was supposed to be used only for food (Milgrom, 2001: 2162). The landowners were supposed to share the produce of the land freely with their servants, their labourers and their animals, both domestic and wild (Hartley, 1992: 434). According to Kinsler (1999): “God’s intentions for God’s people throughout these cycles of rest and restoration is perhaps clearest in Exodus 16, which is the first reference to the Sabbath day ... The Hebrew slaves had just been delivered from slavery in Egypt and from Pharaoh’s army to the Red Sea but then they became hungry in the desert, they complained, they remembered the flesh pots and bread of Egypt. They were ready to go back to Egypt to slavery! So Yahweh

responded with manna and quails but did so with a fundamental lesson concerning how they were to live in freedom. They were to gather just enough food each day for each member of each family so that no one would have more than enough. This was how they were supposed to live in the Promised Land as a liberated people. The land would produce abundantly so that all would have enough if they would learn to be satisfied with enough, to share equitably, to live in solidarity. They were to establish a socioeconomic spiritual order in which no one would have more or less than enough” (1999: 398).

The Sabbath year according to the observations above served to keep the economic levels of the people equal. Because of the Sabbath year provisions no family was supposed to decline to destitution and no family was supposed to grow too rich. People were supposed each to have enough to live well.

Kinsler (1999: 395-399) asked the pertinent question on the relevance of Leviticus 25 for today.

He suggested that today one can respond to the Sabbath year message by caring for creation and resisting the increasing destruction of the biosphere. He further suggested that the call to justice, solidarity with the poor and oppressed, the practice of freedom and the care of creation must be critical for all.

In his study of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, Baker (1998: 55) identified three major theological themes for reflection: rest, freedom and restoration. The Sabbath year and the Jubilee regulations include the idea of rest in particular for the land (Exod 23:10-11, Lev 25:2-5). For six years the land serves mankind but in the seventh year, it is allowed to rest. This in Baker’s view served to help men and women acknowledge that they do not have any absolute right over land (1998: 55-61).

He then gave the following challenging ethical suggestions:

1. Humanity should not exploit the land indiscriminately for their own profit driven by pressures of consumerism because they have been permitted to live there and enjoy its produce and blessing from the Owner of the land Himself the Lord God.
2. The principle of dividing land according to need rather than desire for power is a good one which we should endeavour to apply today.

3. If we own agricultural land we can put the Old Testament regulation about rest in the seventh year and fiftieth years directly into practice.
4. Accept the produce of the land as a gift from God rather than as an absolute right.
5. Because land belongs to God who divided it fairly when Israel entered Palestine, the rich must not expand their estates by buying land from the poor (Isa 5: 8).
6. God created resources and He should be allowed to determine how they are to be used.
7. Use land so as to leave it good and user friendly for the next generation.
8. Cancel the debts of the poor nations and poor brothers.
9. We need to seek to work towards equality in salaries, opportunities and privileges.

Kinsler (1999: 395) also came up with suggestions on how the Sabbath year message can be made relevant for today. In his view, the sabbatical year message helps to practically answer the ecological crisis which is already causing enormous damage and may cause the collapse of the biosphere within the next 100 years if major measures are not taken immediately. The following are the Sabbath year principles he suggested one can apply today:

1. Address the economic order which is accelerating the concentration of wealth and the deepening of poverty in every region, limiting the employment possibilities of hundreds of millions to slave like roles, excluding even more millions from paid employment and benefits, and imposing domination through a system of external and internal national debts that are largely unpayable.
2. Show respect for human beings and outlaw slavery, for example by setting maximum hours of work per day and a minimum wage.
3. Develop a theological ecology in which the conservation of natural resources is based on the conviction that God created them and God has the right to determine how they are used.
4. Aim to leave the world in good condition for the next generation.
5. Fight the human lust for power over other human beings which shows itself in so many shapes and sizes including direct control of individuals (slavery in its various modern

forms), and nations (power politics), and indirect exploitation by means of trade (monopolies), economics (international debt) culture (fashion, the media) and so on.

The suggestions by the two scholars just cited demonstrate that the Sabbath year message is still relevant and applicable today. The ancient Israelite context in which the Sabbath year initially applied is totally different from our present context but the principles of the Sabbath year can still be applied today. I found their suggestions quite constructive and practical, especially the suggestions on dividing land according to need rather than desire for power. Their suggestion that land should not be exploited indiscriminately challenges our consumer oriented society to exercise discretion in using the natural resources at its disposal.

## **5.9 CONCLUSION**

In my investigation of the Sabbath year in the Holiness Code, I have found that according to scholars cited, this institution may have been set up during the early settlement period. In this year the land was supposed to rest. This entailed that in this year the land was not to be ploughed. The whole exercise signified that God is the Creator and Owner of land. Human beings did not possess absolute right over the land. They served as stewards of God over His land. The knowledge that human beings were stewards and not the owners of land challenged human beings to be ethical in caring for their pieces of land and in relating to land belonging to other people. Human beings were to enjoy land as a gift from God. The Sabbath year stood as a great reminder of this reality. To the extent that the Sabbath year challenged human beings to use land with a sense of accountability to God and with due consideration for their fellowmen it served to help land to remain within the family.

The Sabbath year, being a time accompanied by human rest, was the most appropriate time for families to celebrate God's gift of land which provided them with a place of rest. God, being the ultimate owner of land, is also the only one with the authority to revoke that right from those people to whom He had given land. The Sabbath year law could be obeyed and if obeyed, the LORD assured HIS people that He would provide them with food. This scenario checked the rate of decline into poverty which led to eventual loss of land. Among practical ethical suggestions proposed by modern Sabbath year scholars that may be applied today are: avoiding indiscriminate use of land, distributing land according to need rather than desire for power, putting the Sabbath year regulation into practice (allowing land to lie fallow in the Sabbath year), accepting the produce of the land as gifts from God, using land in a manner

that leaves it good for the next generation, cancelling of debts of poor nations and brothers; working towards equality of salaries, opportunities and privileges, outlawing slavery by setting maximum hours for work per week.

What I have affirmed is that in the Holiness Code, the Sabbath year served a humanitarian purpose. In the Sabbath year section of the Holiness Code the Law about the Sabbath year carried both a theological and a humanitarian function.

The literary context of the Sabbath year in the Holiness Code is made up of material from Leviticus 24:10-23 and Leviticus 25:8-54. Preceding the legislation of the Sabbath year in the Holiness Code is recorded the event of a man who blasphemed God's name. God's ruling on him was that he was supposed to be killed and he was indeed killed giving us the impression that God expects His law to be regarded with seriousness and His name in particular was to be regarded with reverence. This event juxtaposed to the Sabbath year message suggests that the Sabbath year as one of God's laws was to be viewed with honour by the Israelites. A light regard of it as God's law by the people would definitely court divine displeasure.

Leviticus 25:8-54 is the passage coming immediately after the Sabbath year text (Lev 25:1-7) and it spells out stipulations of the Jubilee year. The year of Jubilee was to be a year when liberty was proclaimed and the Israelites who had been enslaved were released, land and property were returned to their owners. In the year of Jubilee, as in the Sabbath year, there was to be no sowing or reaping. People were all supposed to live on the after growth of the Jubilee year. To take care of the food needs of the people, God promised a bumper harvest in the sixth year which was going to adequately meet the people's food needs until the next harvest, which only came in the ninth year. The year of Jubilee enjoined that people were to take care of the poor. Relatives were instructed on how to act redemptively for their relatives affected by slavery or poverty. The year of Jubilee instructions, coming soon after the Sabbath year legislation was given, suggests that the Sabbath year was also supposed to breathe the spirit of liberality and benevolence that characterised the year of Jubilee.

What was also established is that the Sabbath year is an institution which had a divine origin and could have been observed had Israel chosen to cooperate with God. What I have also discovered is that the observing of the Sabbath year message had the great potential of helping land to remain within the family.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

In this chapter I seek to prove whether my hypothetical statement has been proven right by the findings I have made on the theological implications of the Sabbath year in the Pentateuch concerning the maintenance of land within the family.

In the Covenant code, I investigated two texts on the Sabbath year: Exodus 21:2-6 which dwells on the slave release and Exodus 23:10-11 which dwells on the lying fallow of land. The law on slave release required that if one bought a Hebrew servant, the servant was supposed to serve for six years and was supposed to go free in the seventh year. Childs (1974: 468) suggested that the freedom granted to a Hebrew servant did not enable one to be completely free. Durham (1987: 321) and Houtman (2000: 115) argued that the freedom awarded a Hebrew slave in the seventh year amounted to total freedom.

I take the position that the Hebrew slaves by virtue of being citizens of Israel by birth were accorded full freedom upon being released in the Sabbath year. The release in the seventh year entailed that if a man entered into servitude as a married person he was to live his wife at the time of release (Exod 21:3). Although this text does not state exactly where a servant who was released in the seventh year would go, it suggests strongly that the freedom granted would allow this person to choose where he wanted to go. There is nothing that would stop this person going to his own homestead and piece of land if he had one.

In the Sabbath year (Exod 23: 10-11) the land was to lay unploughed and unused. The poor among the people were supposed to get food from the land, and wild animals were to eat what the needy people had left. I see this Sabbath year of the land as helping the needy poor people to get access to food and hence to better health. Meanwhile the fields which lay fallow gained fertility in this year so that the land gave better yields to the farmers in the following year. The Sabbath year hence served to improve the health of the people and to improve the fertility of the land. These two elements were vital for maintaining land within the family.

In the book of Exodus the first cultic law which I examined is one which prohibited the making of gods that would stand alongside YHWH as objects of worship (Exod 20:22-26). The laws pointed to YHWH alone as God, to be worshipped in a particular way (Durham, 1987: 319; Childs, 1974: 466).

My conclusion with regard to the laws was that whereas the law against idolatry pointed to YHWH alone as God to be glorified in life the Sabbath year was the special temple set apart to especially contemplate about him and to worship him alone as God. The Sabbath year, we noted, as time set apart by God for divine use, was meant to challenge the people to do away with any other deities. Idolatry in its various forms was to be done away with and this included idolatry in its subtle form as the obsession of a person's life with something to the point where that object or thing dethroned God from his proper place in life. This form of idolatry was to be done away with and in this way the Sabbath year stood as a bulwark against the idols of materialism that drive men and women to use inhuman means to acquire material possessions like land.

In my view, this cultic law was in line with my hypothetical statement.

The law of retaliation (*Lex talionis*) operated on the principle of like retribution for an injury exacted on someone (Durham, 1987: 471). In my investigation, it was found that this law was set in place to protect members of inferior social standing from abuse by the wealthy since under this law the wealthy could no longer escape punishment for a crime by simply paying a fine (Childs, 1974: 472). With regards to land, I concluded by suggesting that it is most reasonable to see the God who protected the bodily welfare of an individual moving a step further to protect the economic welfare of the same person. Just as God took a hard stand against those who inflicted bodily injury to other persons, I see God in the same vein taking a familiar stand against those who sought to rob other people of their land. The Sabbath year was there to provide time for restful reflection and inculcation of the protective love of God which would equip people to stand with God to protect vulnerable members of the society whose land was being grabbed by the ruthless elements in the society.

The law in the Covenant code also required that if a man gave a donkey, ox or a sheep to his neighbour for safe keeping, and if that animal was then stolen from the neighbour, he was supposed to make restitution to the owner (Exodus 22:10-12). The compensation was to be paid in full (Childs, 1974: 476; Durham, 1987: 326). On this subject, I argued that if God was



concerned with how people regarded each other's property even in the form of domestic animals, he was even more concerned over how they regarded each others property in the form of important things like family land. The Sabbath year, I noted, challenged human beings to be more humane, just and accountable in dealing with one another and each other's property. The Sabbath year demanded that within the covenant community wrongs were to be made right and unjust practices were to be brought to a halt and pave the way for peace and harmony in the land. By challenging people to deal with a sense of accountability with regard to other people's property the Sabbath year helped people to regard other people's land with respect and not as chattel for grabbing.

In the book of Exodus, I referred to the theme of creation. Fretheim (2003: 253) said that creation is the most basic theological category with which the book of Exodus deals. The Creator God enabled Israel to be fruitful, multiply and grow strong in Egypt. After creating Israel, God provided for them a land, just as he did to the Edenic pair of Adam and Eve. To Israel the land of Canaan was her own "Eden" to be cared for and protected. The gift of the land of Canaan automatically implied that Israel was responsible for caring for that land and each family which inherited land was supposed to act as responsible stewards over their portion of land. The Sabbath year, like its similar institution the Sabbath day provided human beings with time to worship and praise God for creating them and redeeming them and providing them with a heritage of land.

In the wilderness God revealed himself as the provident God who provided Israel with manna from heaven (Exodus 16). The manna could only be picked up on all other days other than the Sabbath. The Sabbath day stood as a reminder to Israel of the fact that in order to experience God's blessings one needs to take God at his word especially in connection with the way of both receiving and utilizing the gifts of God in life.

At Sinai Israel entered into a covenant with God. The covenant entailed that Israel became the people of God and accepted God's law, the Decalogue, as the law which would govern their lives (Exodus 19: 1-40; 40:38).

The God who gave the law as a gift would also give Israel land as a gift and in our view these two were related. The law would govern how the land would be distributed and used. The land would, on the other hand, provide human beings with their temporal needs for the sustenance of life so that they could worship the Lord with joy, conducting themselves

according to His law. The Sabbath year, apart from being a year of covenant renewal, was a time that governed humans' use of land and pointed humanity back to the Creator of the land. It was the Creator God's plan that each family would possess land which was supposed to be kept within that family. By making the people to look to the Creator of the land, the Sabbath year helped land to remain in the family. By serving as a time of covenant renewal the Sabbath year challenged the people to live harmoniously together in the land.

The Sabbath year implied that land would be governed by divine law and where there - is divine wisdom land not only benefits human beings but also brings glory and honour to God when those people respond to God with praise and with care for each other. The Sabbath year law along with other laws discussed in the book of Exodus and the Covenant Code were laws whose theological foundations helped land to remain within the family. These laws prove our hypothesis right since they advocated that land should remain in the family.

At the end of every seven years Israelites were supposed to cancel debts (Deut 15:1). The Hebrew word used *Semittah* literally means 'dropping' and refers to debt release (Tigay, 1996: 145). By this law, creditors were supposed to forgive debts when the time of the release was declared (Merrill, 1994: 243). In my view, the releasing of debts means the Sabbath year served as a very significant means of economic recovery for debtors. This economic policy, I think, helped poor families to spend their financial resources on self improvement rather than on servicing debts. To those debtors who owned land the debt cancellation scheme checked the process of sinking deeper and deeper into debt which would eventually lead to loss of land by the family.

The law of debt release emphasises blood ties of the Israelites. Bosman (2004: 239) accurately noted that in Deuteronomy 15:1-11 the first reference to the special obligation to the brother is made and that this expression is used no less than seven times in this chapter and is used here as a designation to Israelites. These are the people who were supposed to benefit from the debt cancellation scheme. At the same time Israelites were brothers not just because of blood ties but also because of their common faith as recipients of God's special grace of election and covenant (Merrill, 1994: 244). I see this law built on the theological foundations of God's election as having played a pivotal role in helping land to remain within the family. Not only did it appeal to blood ties, it also appealed to spiritual ties that compelled the Israelites to act with sympathy towards one another.

The year of slave release Deut 15:12-18 marked the year when a Hebrew man or woman who had sold himself to serve as a slave to another was left to go free. After this period he/she was to be released from economic bondage and become independent (Tigay, 1996: 147). The released slave was to be provided with supplies that would make it possible for him/her to begin in life again (Merrill, 1994: 246). Slave holders were reminded that they were at one time slaves in Egypt and the LORD God came and redeemed them (Deut 15:15). The reason for citing Israel's deliverance is because her redemption from Egypt was a good reason why Israel was to extend goodness to others.

Divine blessings would follow compliance with this law of release. Not only was a Hebrew slave released in the seventh year, he was also given capital to begin again in life. The year of slave release served as a year in which the potential to full restoration of an individual to economic well being could be realised. In this year the possibility was opened to redeem part of or all of the lost land by Hebrew slaves with the capital received from their masters. Hence, the Sabbath year was a year of great possibilities in the area of restoration to landed status to many Hebrew slaves.

In my discussion of the theological trends of the Deuteronomistic Code, I began with the centralization of worship (Deut 12-13). The theme of the centralization of the cult is a great theme in the book of Deuteronomy. Contrary to the worship of the Canaanite gods who were worshipped in different shrines in the land the worship of YHWH was to take place in one central place of worship (Merrill, 1994: 221). The whole exercise was aimed at giving total allegiance to God and a total rejection to the claim of any deity to Israel's worship (Miller, 1990: 131). Proper Sabbath year observance entailed focussing of attention on YHWH alone as the only God and going on to do things that glorified God's name in that year. This was one of the conditions for Israel as a nation to remain in the land.

The Sabbath year to the king in Israel meant a great spiritual challenge. If the king sought to meet the ideals set for him in the Deuteronomistic Code the Sabbath year presented to him the following challenges: to read the Law so as to refresh his mind on what God required him to do in the Sabbath year, to find out how to implement the entire law in his life and finally to find out how he could use his influence to ensure that the Sabbath year was observed in his entire kingdom. If the king sought to be loyal to God he would create a spiritual and moral atmosphere in his kingdom that would ensure that the Sabbath year was well observed in his

realm. Although the laws on kingship were to be implemented by one person, they were meant to benefit individuals, families and the nation at large.

In Deuteronomy 19:1-13, Moses instructed the people to select three cities as places of ‘asylum’ to which a person, accused of manslaughter, would flee for protection (Merrill, 1994: 276). The Sabbath year, like the city of asylum, assured freedom to those slaves who managed to enter its temporal gates. The Sabbath year assured remission of debts to those debtors who entered its temporal gates. The Sabbath year served as a line of demarcation between a life under threat from destructive forces and a life of security and freedom, a life under bondage to sin and a life liberated from the clutches of iniquity. The Sabbath year served its purpose of liberation and debt release to those people (slaves and masters) who obeyed its call. By demanding that debts be nullified and slaves be released, the Sabbath year went a long way in restoring the Hebrew slaves to a normal life of freedom and economic independence and I think it helped some Hebrew slaves to redeem their properties like land.

The ceremony of the first fruits Deut 26:1-11 had to do with farmers thanking God for His guidance of Israel’s history, for the gift of the land, for peace and for a good harvest. This ceremony pointed to God as the Redeemer and Provider. At the end of the ceremony the worshipper sat down to feast at the temple and during the feast he invited strangers and the poor. The Sabbath year like the ceremony of the first fruits had its theological base on the memory of God as Redeemer. The Sabbath year like the ceremony of the first fruits had a humanitarian concern. In the Deuteronomic Code God demanded that Israel should act redemptively towards debtors and slaves just as she had experienced the redeeming grace of God. The Redeemer God of the ceremony of the first fruits who is the same as the God of the Sabbath year expects his people to act as conduits of his redemption.

The year of cancelling debts, the year of releasing slaves and the ceremony of the first fruits each in its own way and scale acted as vehicles of empowerment for the economically weak members of the covenant community. This was more so with the Sabbath year which had more to offer that could redress the social and economical equilibrium of the nation.

The ceremony of the first fruits was meant to thank God for peace and tranquillity that allowed agricultural activities to go on uninterrupted. The Sabbath year as a year of the land to rest challenged the people to consider God as the true source of rest.

The ceremony of first fruits served as an acknowledgement that God is the Owner and the Provider of the land and hence reminded man that he was a tenant over God's land. The Sabbath year challenged human beings to act as faithful stewards of God's land. The Sabbath year was meant to carry the thankfulness to God that characterized the ceremony of the first fruits. One would not see a person who is grateful to God for the land needlessly disposing of that land nor forcibly seeking to deprive other members of the covenant community of their land.

Tithing (Deut 14:22-29) was a humanitarian law concerned with taking care of the needs of the poor. Like the Sabbath year law, tithing pointed to God as a God of compassion and liberality who commends practical godliness. Where there is practical godliness, it was noted that land ownership is seen as a form of stewardship and not an object of political bickering. The Sabbath year challenged the people to be proactive in seeking the well being of their brothers and this discouraged the spirit of greed that seeks to expand one's economic base at the expense of others.

In my discussion of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, it was found that God commanded Israel to love God with all her heart, all her soul and all her might. The love commanded in Deuteronomy is not a mere motive or sensual but principled love (Merrill, 1994: 164). This love expresses itself in benevolent acts and loyalty and service (Deut 10:18). This love recognizes YHWH alone as God and goes on keeping the commandments of God. The Sabbath year as part of God's law signified loyalty to him. Denial of God's law and even of the Sabbath year alone would signify a shift in loyalty and would mark the beginning of rebellion to God which might lead to disastrous consequences for Israel. The Sabbath year as a sign of recognition of YHWH alone as God stood as a reminder to Israel always to be loyal to the one God of her confession. Love for God should express itself by keeping God's commandments. Such love played a great part in helping Israel to remain in the land since it placed God the Giver of land at the centre of its affections.

Deuteronomy 28:1-68 is a long discourse on the blessings or curses that would follow Israel if they obeyed or disobeyed God. A glorious prospect of peace and prosperity awaited Israel if they would faithfully obey the Lord, being careful to do all his commandments (Wenham, 2003: 140). Disobedience was threatened with drought, disease, crop failure, economic collapse, dependence, defeat, oppression, famine, cannibalism, and exile (Tigay, 1996: 257). The Sabbath year as a sign of Israel's loyalty to God needed to be jealousy guarded as well.

Neglect of the Sabbath year law constituted disobedience enough to warrant divine wrath and could result in exile for Israel.

The reading of the law every seventh year suggested that the Sabbath year was dedicated to having a spiritual encounter with God through the reading of the Word. This event also served as a covenant renewal exercise when Israel pledged her loyalty to God. The Sabbath year in this case provided the actual time during which the covenant was renewed and it served at the same time as the sign of the covenant relationship between God and Israel. It was the renewal of the covenant that assured Israel of divine protection in the land and the Sabbath year was a great sign of the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

In the book of Leviticus we discussed the burnt offering (Lev 1:1-7). The burnt offering sacrifice functioned as the theological base upon which the entire book of Leviticus stands. This offering was wholly consumed at the altar and no creature partook of it but all of it ascended to the Lord (Milgrom, 1991: 146).

In my investigation, it was found that with reference to the Sabbath year this offering suggested that the Sabbath year was meant to portray a God who takes pleasure in the worship that comes from humans who worshipped God with all their hearts. As a perfect offering the burnt offering pointed to the fact that God required perfect gifts from his children and suggests that the Sabbath year was meant to be a time dedicated to teaching Israel principles of faithful stewardship in all areas of life including care of the land and its resources. The importance attached to worship in Israel as a nation was that they were not only supposed to possess the land of Canaan, but that their stay in the land was supposed to be characterized by wholehearted devotion to YHWH. This concept proves our hypothesis to be correct in that the burnt offering suggests that the Sabbath year was meant to be a time dedicated to teaching Israel principles of honest stewardship in all areas of life including caring for the land and its resources.

The ordination of priests is a ceremony which pointed to the wholehearted nature of the service the priests were supposed to render to YHWH. The link between the ordination service and the Sabbath and the retention of the land within the family though not explicitly stated can be easily deduced. The LORD who set Aaron and his sons apart to constitute a holy priesthood also set the Sabbath year apart to constitute holy time. Just as by the act of ordination Aaron's hands were filled with the responsibility of the priesthood the Sabbath

year by being set apart for holy use by God was meant to be used exclusively for the purpose for which it was set apart. It was as Israel acknowledged in her life and experiences the sanctity of the Sabbath year that she was assured of a permanent place in the land. Disobedience would result either in exile from the land or death from pestilences.

The ritual of thanksgiving for childbirth was a ceremony in which a parent thanked the LORD for the gift of a child. The Sabbath year was meant to carry over the spirit of thanksgiving that characterized the ceremony of thanksgiving for childbirth. The Sabbath year needed to challenge Israel to be grateful to God not only for the gift of children but other gifts like redemption, life and the land. Land was among the gifts people were supposed to celebrate and guard jealously because it would give security to the children that were being born.

The Day of Atonement (Lev 16) was a day when the sins of Israel as a nation were cleansed and removed from their midst. This day was important in that God on this day forgave all manner of Israel's sins. The God who cared for Israel to the extent of forgiving her even of her willful sins could be counted on to give Israel the security of land.

The Day of Atonement and the Sabbath year were sacred times of solemn rest in Israel. These times needed to be characterized by a conscious and deliberate focus on God as the author of true rest. The Day of Atonement in keeping with the work that the LORD did for his people on this day was meant to direct the eyes of Israel on God's forgiveness whilst the Sabbath year needed to help to focus the eyes of humanity on God's creative power, his providential care for humanity with the gifts of life, land, and spirituality. The Sabbath year pointed to God as the central person behind Israel's existence and if Israel lost sight of Him life itself would lose meaning and Israel's place in the land of heritage would be jeopardized. In relation to our statement of hypothesis the theology of the sanctuary and Day of Atonement do suggest that the Sabbath year provided time to stress the need for retention of land within the family.

Concerning the tithing law in the book of Leviticus, it was found that the tithe of the produce of the field and also from wild crops such as fruits all belonged to the LORD (Hartley, 1992: 485; Milgrom, 2001: 2396). The whole concept of tithing pointed to God as the ultimate Owner of all material possessions. Just as in the material sphere the tithe is holy so also in the temporal sphere the Sabbath year constituted holy time to be used only for divine purposes.

The Sabbath was a time that challenged human beings to view themselves as stewards who are accountable to God for the way they made use of their temporal possessions and material possessions. In relationship to the land the Sabbath year challenged people to consider how they cared for the land as their heritage. It is this sense of accountability to God that also influenced people on how either to dispose of land or to seek to acquire more land. The Sabbath year by challenging human beings concerning their accountability to God caused land to remain within the family.

In the Holiness Code, it was found that the introductory formula emphasized that what was being issued was YHWH's word (Milgrom, 2001: 1451). The authority behind the message prefixed by the introductory formula was not human but divine. It was also found that divine decrees (Lev 18:4) referred to decrees prescribed by God whilst laws (*mishpatim*) referred to general laws that could be deduced logically. In Leviticus 18 the decrees and laws enjoined are laws on sexual relations (Lev 18: 24-29).

In Leviticus 18:24-29 divine punishments were threatened for sexual immorality such as existed among pre-Israelite inhabitants of Palestine. Sexual immorality defiled the land and the land because of this sin was forced to vomit out its inhabitants. The Sabbath year by implication was meant to be a time when Israel contemplated on the purity of life by cultivating a deeper relationship with God.

Leviticus 19:1-3 is a call to Israel to be holy as God is holy. Juxtaposed to this instruction is the instruction for every Israelite to both honour his/her parents and to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. These two commandments point to man's duty towards other human beings and to God. The Sabbath year by implication was meant to be a time to nurture one's relationship with one's fellow human beings and with the LORD.

In Leviticus 23:3 the Sabbath day is described as a day of complete rest. On the Sabbath the people were supposed to rest and in the Sabbath year the land was supposed to rest from human interference.

The Feast of the First Fruits (Lev 23:9-11) pointed to the reality that land was a gift from God. Secondly the gifts brought to God on this occasion were an acknowledgement by Israel that God is the One who blessed the land in order for it to produce crops. The Sabbath year similarly served the purpose of pointing to God as the Giver of land and the Provider for all of Israel's needs.



The Feast of Trumpets pointed to God as the Provider of rains and crops and it was also a time of covenant renewal. Whereas the Feast of Trumpets celebrated God as the Provider of rain and crops the Sabbath year celebrated God as the Provider of food to Israel.

The year of Jubilee occurred after seven weeks of years on the Day of Atonement (Hartley, 1992: 434). In the year of Jubilee liberty was proclaimed in the land, debts were cancelled, land owners who had leased their patrimony returned to their land whilst Israelite debtor slaves were released. The proclamation helped families to regain their lost land.

The Jubilee laws ensured that land could only be rented out but never sold away outright. This law clearly ensured that land remained in the hands of the family which inherited it. The Jubilee law like the Sabbath year law reiterated the point that land belonged to God whilst the Israelites served as God's tenants and stewards. To ensure that land remained within the family the Jubilee law provided for a redemption plan for the land. Before one could dispose of his land a kinsman redeemer was supposed to step in and purchase the land so that it could remain within the clan. Such land would revert to the actual owner in the year of Jubilee. One had a right to redeem his own land if he prospered. These measures were all put in place to insure that family land remained within the hands of families who inherited it. The Sabbath year similarly challenged people to consider land as a heritage from God over which they served as stewards. God's word over how land was to be used and guarded was paramount.

My investigation of the theological implications of the Sabbath year in the Pentateuchal books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy has yielded abundant proof that the Sabbath year in Leviticus 25:1-7 as interpreted in its theological context helped land to remain within the family.

Earlier on, I defined the Sabbath year in a comprehensive manner taking into consideration its various aspects as they occur in the Pentateuch. My aim now is to define the Sabbath year in the three legal, social and theological contexts which I bring into focus in this thesis..

In the Covenant Code (Exod 23:10-11), the Sabbath year, in my view, was the seventh year in a cycle of seven years in which the land was to be left unploughed and the vineyards and olive groves remained untrimmed so that from their spontaneous growth the poor people and wild animals might get food.

The Sabbath year according to the Holiness Code (Lev 5:2-7) may be defined as the seventh year in a cycle of seven in which the land was supposed to rest unto the LORD and the spontaneous growth from the land was supposed to be eaten by the owner of the land, his male and female servants, hired workers, temporary residents, livestock and wild animals.

The Sabbath year in the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 15:1-11) may be defined as the seventh year in a cycle of seven years and was known as God's time for the remission of debts and in this year debts owed by Israelite debtors were cancelled.

The Sabbath year legislation in Exodus 23:10-11 makes no mention of God and it is motivated by alleviating the plight of the poor and wild animals. The Sabbath year in Leviticus 25:2-7 is designated as the Sabbath of rest unto the LORD and was motivated by rest for the land. Implied in the statement that the Sabbath year was unto the LORD is the fact God is the Owner of land. The after-growth of the land was meant not to be just for the poor but for the owner of the field, his household, male and female servants, temporary residents, hired workers and domestic and wild animals. The Sabbath year legislation in the Deuteronomic Code says nothing about land but enjoins that Hebrew debts were to be cancelled in the seventh year, a year referred to as God's time of remitting debts.

At the same time in the Covenant Code (Exod 21:2-6) Hebrew slaves who had served their period of indentureship had to be set free in the seventh year. In the Deuteronomic Code the slave release covered female slaves who are not mentioned in the Covenant Code. I do suggest here that these two legislations might have been written by the same person Moses at different times. In my view the Covenant Code (Exod 21:2-6) legislation being the shorter version was written earlier but formed the basis for a broader and more enlightened legislation in the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 15:12-18). This, in my view, represents the work done by Moses in his earlier days and work that he did in his years of maturity. According to Smith (2004: 96): "Because human beings grow and learn, it seems logical to expect that the longer prophets serve, the more they grow in depth of their knowledge and understanding of God and His truth. That would imply that what they wrote at the apex of their prophetic career would be clearer and more profound than what they wrote earlier" (2004:96).

The question is whether these differences in emphasis point to the reality that what the different legal codes are referring to are indeed different unrelated legislations? Is there not also a possibility that these different emphases may be pointing to different aspects of the

same institution? To determine the relationships that exist between the Sabbath year legislations in the different legal codes we will conduct a brief literature survey.

Paran (1989: 23-34), cited by Milgrom (2001: 2155) said that the writer of the Sabbath year legislation in the Holiness Code had the Sabbath year legislation of the Covenant Code before him. In other words the relationship between the Sabbath year in the Holiness Code and that in the Covenant Code was one of literary dependence. Shead (2002: 20) saw the Sabbath year in the Holiness Code as an expansion of the Sabbath year legislation in the Covenant Code. Kinsler (1999: 396) concurred. What these scholars are essentially affirming is that the Sabbath year legislation in Exodus 23:10-11 is the earlier version of the expanded Sabbath year legislation in the Holiness Code (Lev 25:2-7). In other words the legislation in the Exodus 23:10-11 and the one in Leviticus 25:2-7 essentially refer to the same institution.

The question now is of the place of the year of debt release (Deut 15:12-18). According to Tigay (1996: 243) the link that exists between the debt release legislation and the release of land is seen in the use of the common Hebrew word for release in both cases, the use of the word *shemittah* which means dropping or release. In connection with land this word points to the leaving of the land to remain unused in the Sabbath year and in connection with debtors it points to debt cancellation.

With these observations, I am assured that the different emphases found concerning the Sabbath year legislation in different legal codes are actually different aspects of the same institution.

The overall theological picture that is formed about the Sabbath year in the Pentateuch is that this institution pointed to God as the Creator, Owner and Provider of land. Since human beings needed a constant reminder of this reality God instituted the Sabbath year institution to constantly remind human beings that land belonged to God. In the different legal documents of the Pentateuch the Sabbath year message was given with different theological emphases.

In the Book of Leviticus, the theological emphasis is on God's holiness and the divine ethical mandate to the nation of Israel to seek to be holy as God Himself is holy (Lev 19:1-2). As God was holy in His realm and sphere of operation, Israel was also to be holy in her realm and sphere of operation. The call to holiness carried many ethical imperatives for Israel. This call meant that Israel was supposed to pursue a life of moral purity. In the economic sphere which is the focus of this dissertation, Israel needed to operate as an egalitarian brotherly

society where material resources like land were equitably distributed. The Sabbath year was one of the holy institutions whose purpose was to challenge the people to value holiness in the life. This challenge helped Israel to look at the gift of land with a different perspective from the ordinary eye. Instead of being viewed as a means of gratifying one's greed for unbridled accumulation of wealth land was viewed as a divine means to perpetuate life and harmony among human beings. The Sabbath year by stressing this perspective helped people to act temperately and with considerateness toward other people's property including land and in this way helped land to remain within the family.

In the Book of Leviticus and in the Jubilee laws in particular, land is seen as belonging to families and the year of Jubilee required that all land return to its owners in this year. Land in the Sabbath year (Lev 25:2-7) must also be understood in the Jubilee year context where land is seen as belonging to families on a permanent basis. That land could not be bought or sold because it belonged to God. It could only be loaned out but reverted to the owner through either the avenue of redemption or the provision of the Jubilee year of restoration of land to its owners. The implicitly given message in the Sabbath year law that land belonged to God who gave it permanently to specific families is explicitly stated in the Jubilee year laws.

In the Deuteronomic Code the God who loved and redeemed Israel demanded that Israel in turn was to love the LORD wholeheartedly by obeying God's commandments and being loyal to Him as their only God (Deut 6:4-9). The Deuteronomic Code placed emphasis on obedience as a condition for Israel to remain in the land. If Israel obeyed God her place in the land was assured and many divine blessings would follow her in the land (Deut 28:1-15). If on the other hand Israel disobeyed God she would be cursed and even be divinely evicted from the land (Deut 28:16-68).

In Deuteronomy 15: 1-11 the law required cancelling of debts every seven years. This law, though stated at the national level, was implemented at the individual and familial level. This law appealed to families and individual creditors to cancel debts of their Hebrew brothers. The law actually said 'every creditor shall cancel the loan he had made to his fellow Israelite' as if speaking to an individual. This law was national in the sense that it appealed to everyone in the nation but in implementation it called for individual and familial commitment. The important insight this law provides in this thesis is that in the Deuteronomic Code one finds promises of blessing for obedience to the Sabbath year's stipulation given. After instructing the Israelites to cancel debts of their brothers in the Sabbath year, the LORD followed up by

promising Israel that there would be no poor person in Israel because the LORD would richly bless Israel ( Deut 15:14). If Israel obeyed God, He would have turned her into a channel of blessing for other nations. Israel would actually prosper to the point where other nations turn to them for loans (Christensen, 2001: 313).

I see the rise of Israel to prosperity as a nation as emanating from the family unit. This is the level where debts would be cancelled in the Sabbath year. If this message was taken and practiced by every family or most of the families in Israel then Israel as a nation would be blessed of the LORD. She would have become a prosperous nation. The nation's prosperity began at the family level. In other words, it is obedience by the individual families to God's law in Israel that gave the nation its character which would result in divine blessing coming to all.

In Deuteronomy 15:18 the LORD again promised a blessing for the Israelite who apart from releasing his Hebrew 'slave' in the seventh year, went on to provide him with a beginning capital..

The Sabbath year or seventh year of slave release in the Deuteronomic Code was not just a year of cessation from work. It was a year to be filled with deeds of brotherly care for the needy people in the covenant community.

The picture one gets from this message is one of Israelites settled in their land as a nation made up of God-fearing families that have prospered because of God's blessings. The surrounding nations that would seek for loans from Israel are the ones which would come to where Israel as a nation and as families were placed (their land) and seek for financial assistance. This is the kind of blessing God promised to Israel in the context of the Sabbath year observance in the Deuteronomic Code. Sabbath year observance in the right spirit is seen here as a condition not only of remaining in the land but also for national prosperity that came as result of family prosperity. Tigay (1996: 150) accurately noted that Deuteronomy is not only interested in compliance with the law but in the individual's feelings whilst carrying it out. Christensen (2001: 321) concurred.

Land rest as articulated in the Covenant Code (Exod 23:10-11) and in the Holiness Code (Lev 25:2-7) was also a matter of crucial importance. Many scholars associate the seventy year Babylonian captivity that took place later as having been necessitated by the need of the land to experience its rest which it had not received for four hundred and ninety years (Cole, 1973:

178). By implication the observance of the Sabbath year as a year of rest for the land carried the blessing of Israel as a nation being assured of a continued place in the land. This by implication said families were assured of their place in the land by remembering to uphold the Sabbath year ideals of the land's rest.

In the Book of Exodus the Sabbath year legislation (Exod 23:10-11) appears in the context of the Covenant Code. In other words, in this book the Sabbath year legislation appears as one of the stipulations by YHWH to Israel. Israel in this text was in a peculiar covenant relationship to YHWH because He had delivered Israel from Egypt. As Israel's Suzerain God gave His stipulations by which Israel was to abide in order to continue to receive the Divine King's protection. In appreciation of the redemption God had accomplished on her behalf and the covenant relationship wherein Israel now stood as God's people, Israel had to abide by the stipulations given by God to her. This was the way of continuing the covenant relationship between God and Israel and guaranteed the divine King's continued protection for Israel in the land. As long as Israel observed the stipulations of the covenant, including the Sabbath year legislation, she would continue to enjoy God's favour. Israel was to further express her covenant faithfulness by leaving the land to lie fallow during the Sabbath year and allowing the poor and wild animals to feed from the usufruct of the land.

In the Book of Exodus, it was also discovered that creation is the most basic theological category the book dwells on. God as Creator gave the new nation He had 'created' land. Israel on her part was supposed to serve as faithful stewards over God's creation which came to them as a gift. They had to till and care for the land for six years. In the seventh year which was the Sabbath year in recognition of the fact that God is the Creator and Owner of the land the Israelites had to leave the land unused and unploughed with the spontaneous growth of the land being reserved for use by the poor and wild animals. Although the newly 'created' Israel received the land of Canaan as a nation, the settlement in the land was to be according to clans and families. Families are the ones that actually owned pieces of land which they passed on to their descendants. Families are the ones that guarded family land and protected it from being lost to other people.

In my investigation, it was also discovered that the three major aspects of the Sabbath year were within human reach in terms of implementation. The Sabbath year of land rest could be implemented without problems since as already suggested by Milgrom (2001: 2158) the after

growth of the Sabbath year would be in such abundance so as to provide food enough for all the people in the land of Israel.

The dimension of debt release was also within reach of implementation if the people believed that in cancelling debts of their brothers in the Sabbath year they would actually be blessed of the LORD. Slave release was also a possible feat if the Israelites believed that God would follow up such humanitarian deeds with His blessings. The possibility of the various aspects being implemented in life largely depended on the extent to which the Israelites were prepared to cooperate with God.

At the beginning of this thesis, it was said an investigation of the Sabbath year message could be justified along practical, theological, economic and ethical grounds. The findings in these areas are all on the affirmative. It was found that the Sabbath year could indeed be observed. Creditors could cancel the debts of their brothers with the full assurance that God would bless them if they did (Deut 15:1-11). Slaveholders could release them and they were also assured of God's blessing if they did (Deut 15:12-18). The requirements of the land to be left unused and unploughed in the seventh year could be realized and there could have been no hardship to face since God promised that He would cause the fields to produce abundant food in the sixth year to take care of the people's needs in the Sabbath year. In the Sabbath year itself we found that the land would produce food that could adequately meet each family's needs (Lev 25:2-7).

On the theological level, it was discovered that the Sabbath year originated from God's instruction and pointed to God as Creator and Provider. God after creating the human being provided him with a place where he could stay. The land that God gave to the human being became his home which he had to look after as God the Provider of the home required.

On the economic level, it was found that obedience to the Sabbath year law rather than leading the nation to grinding poverty would actually lead the nation to prosperity since God would bless them as families and as a nation.

On the ethical level, the Sabbath year law challenged people to be generous, to value and practice purity in the life, to take care of the poor, to value God's creation, to value each other's property, to take care of family members and to worship the LORD. The question one may need to address before concluding this thesis is whether the Sabbath year was an ideal to motivate people to do good or whether it was an institution that could be practically observed.

Gerstenberger (1996: 377) said that the Sabbath year was a utopian idealistic institution. Noth (1962: 190) says that we only hear briefly of the practical enforcement of the Sabbath year in the Old Testament in Nehemiah 10:31. Noth (1962: 190) went further to cite 1 Maccabees 6: 49, 53 where the Sabbath year was observed in the intertestamental period. Wright (1992: 857) correctly argued that Jeremiah 34:8-16 reports a freeing of Hebrew slaves which was subsequently revoked. The account shows clearly that the institution, though neglected was known. These insights from the two scholars suffice to prove that the Sabbath year legislation was indeed a legislation which could be observed had Israel chosen to cooperate with God.

For further research, I would recommend two important areas: The Sabbath year and the maintenance of land in good ecological condition and also the Sabbath year and caring for the poor in the Pentateuch. What I dwelt on was the Sabbath year and maintenance of land within the family. The two areas I have recommended are of great importance because of the problems of ecological challenges that are facing planet earth today and the accelerating rates of poverty in many parts of the globe today. Kinsler (1999: 395), as noted earlier, pointed out that the ecological crisis the earth is facing can lead to the collapse of the biosphere in the next hundred years if appropriate measures are not urgently taken.

What I have managed to establish in this thesis is the fact that theologically and ethically, the Sabbath year institution in Leviticus 25:1-7 did indeed serve to help with the retention of land within the family.



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